

FORTUNE GULCH

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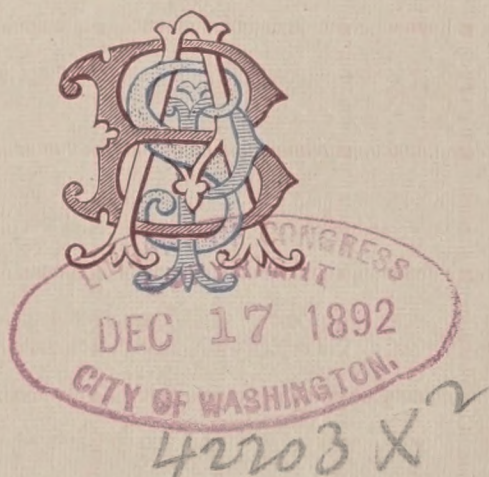
Fortune Gulch.

FORTUNE GULCH

A Story of the Mines

BY

SOPHIE BRONSON TITTERINGTON



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FORTUNE GULCH:

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SOPHIE (BRONSON) TITTERINGTON.



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FORTUNE GULCH.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGER AT THE MINES.

HIGH up in the California Sierras, less than thirty years ago, was the little mining camp of Fortune Gulch. It was named by the original prospector in this region, who, having struck a rich pocket, dreamed of millions to come, staked out a claim, and called it "Fortune." The pocket was soon exhausted, and with it luck departed from its discoverer. But the fame of Fortune Gulch had spread far and wide, and hither hastened a crowd of eager gold seekers. No fabulous wealth rewarded their labor, but steady returns came from patient work with pick, shovel, and pan, or the more ambitious rocker. Fortune Creek ran singing down the hillside, forgetting not its music because here and there it helped the toiling miner to wash out his pan of gravel. In fact, so well did the Gulch continue to yield "pay-dirt," that the little mining camp had a longer lease of life than many of its kind.

One golden day, in the height of the California sum-

mer, a thin, tired, discouraged-looking man, driving a melancholy ox and a cow with a crooked horn before a small covered wagon, came into the camp. The trails were steep that led to Fortune Gulch, and it had been weary climbing. The miners were used to all sorts of surprising things, but it nearly took the breath of the assembled camp away, to see within the wagon a bright, bonnie baby girl, not more than two years old. There was not a woman in the place, and the advent of the little stranger made a genuine sensation. Tears came to the eyes of the roughest men as they thought of wives and little ones in the far-away East. The sight of her baby innocence roused emotions such as souls in the outer darkness might feel at the sight of an angel from heaven.

The arrival occurred near the sunset hour, just as the men were returning from their daily toil. The strangeness of the circumstance filled them with wonder. How came this man to be wandering among the mountains with such a companion?

But in his quiet manner there was a dignity and reserve that compelled respect, even in this lawless region, and impertinent curiosity found itself held in check. Without his baby-girl, however, he might have met with a rougher reception, for the genuine California miner of those pioneer days despised anything that savored of familiarity with civilized life, and this man was evidently not one of their sort. But as the father of such a win-

some child, he was secure, and every man vied with the others in offers of hospitality.

The stranger, with gentle courtesy, firmly refused all proffered aid. His very speech betrayed the difference between him and his would-be hosts.

"No, friends, thank you, kindly," he said. "We have provisions, the cow will give us milk, and the wagon is a very good sleeping place, and will do until I can build a cabin. I wouldn't put any of you out, and we thank you just the same, Bessie and I."

Under ordinary circumstances, this speech might have roused a derisive cry of "tenderfoot." But Baby Bessie, with her great blue eyes, and dark, curling hair, smiled like a little queen on the assembled group, and henceforth every man was her willing slave. A little further conversation revealed the fact that the new-comer's name was David Preston, and that his business in the mountains was the same as theirs—searching for gold.

"Look-a-here, pards," said one of the men, "what's the matter of their takin' Apple Jack's ole cabin. He's lit out for good from these ere diggin's?"

There was a chorus of assent, and one of the miners volunteered to conduct them to the rude cabin, which was much better than no shelter at all.

"It ain't much to look at," said their guide, "but a leetle patchin' 'll make it as good as the rest of us hev."

David Preston expressed his hearty gratitude, and in

the waning light the cabin was hastily made habitable for himself and the child. A good many comforts not usually found in mining camps came out of the little wagon, and the miner who was helping them, Bill Myers by name, opened his eyes in wonder. One small box was filled with books. A mattress, blankets, quilts, and pillows, were unwonted luxuries in Fortune Gulch.

"Hang it, pards, but it's all-fired queer!" said Bill Myers to the assembled crowd that night in Jem Flanagan's saloon. "He's naught but a tenderfoot, and mighty slim-lookin' at that; an' what possessed him to bring that baby into this God-forsaken region, passes my time o' day."

"You're right, pard," responded a tall, lean, lank individual, with long, unkempt hair, whom the camp called "Absalom." For nicknames, fitting some personal or mental peculiarity, seem indigenous to the far Western country; and the early Californian, with all his recklessness and wickedness, greatly favored Bible names. Often their aptness suggested a familiarity with the holy book that would not otherwise be supposed.

"It's mighty strange whar the mother is. It 'pears like they woz two young uns together. Mebbe they'll bring a blessin' to the camp, boys, particular the baby. When I woz a minin' over in Indian Flat, a baby woz borned thar, and bless us, pard, ef we didn't strike it rich the very next day. It sort o' seems to me," he con-

tinued, with a slightly shame-faced air, "ez ef the Lord A'mighty woz a lettler neerer with one of them blessed innercents about."

This seemed to be the general opinion, and David Preston's safety in that camp was henceforth assured. Baby Bessie was a mightier shield than a cordon of armed men would have been.

In perfect friendliness, the miners watched David Preston's movements, curious as to what he would do, and ready to help when opportunity offered. The cabin was situated in a charming nook by Fortune Gulch creek, sheltered from rude winds by the surrounding rocks, and standing in a beautiful group of silver pines. Close at hand was ample pasturage for the ox and cow, where they could be tethered in safety. David Preston spent several days in making things comfortable, and his handiness won approval from the miners. A shelf was put up for the precious books; the scanty household conveniences were arranged with a taste and neatness that suggested feminine care. The broken door was mended and hung in better shape than in its earliest days, while a broad step made it safe and easy for Baby Bessie to climb in and out. Her clothes, although coarse, were carefully mended and clean. Surely, there seemed to be no cloud in her childish sky, however darkly they might shadow her father's horizon.

These necessary preliminaries being finished, regular

work began. Packing a lunch and a bottle of milk in a tin pail, David Preston, always taking the little girl with him, prospected up and down the creek where other claims had not been previously located. He seemed eager and intent in his search, wasting no time in idle dreaming, but almost feverish in the intensity of his industry. His gold-washing outfit, simply a pick, shovel, and pan, he used faithfully. Within three days he had located a claim about half a mile from his cabin, higher up the stream than any other claims had gone.

A mystery seemed to hang about this quiet, sad-faced man, a mystery none the less because of his baby companion. Every morning, after the simple breakfast was over, the ox and the cow safely tethered, the father and child would go together to the lonely place where he had staked out his ground. There they would stay all day, Bessie toddling about the rocks, or sleeping on a bit of green sward close beside her father at his work. At noon, under a giant tree, David Preston would take the child on his lap, and together they ate their noonday lunch. His weariness compelled him to take an hour for rest. A looker-on might have seen the shadows deepen on the man's face, while now and then he pressed his hand convulsively over his heart, as if a spasm of pain threatened his self-control. A little later, rousing himself, he would go wearily to his work, ever sifting the gravel with intense eagerness, gathering up each yellow

grain with miserly care, for these bits of gold gave hope of life and freedom.

The soft tenderness of the twilight is unknown in California. When the sun sinks behind the mountain peaks, night swallows up the world. The stars spring into quick splendor, and the moon, in her season, at once sits upon the abdicated throne of the day. When the golden rays drew toward their westering, David Preston would gather his little girl in his arms, and descend to the humble cabin which was their home in the wilderness.

Bessie was a magnet which drew the miners to the camp in the summer evenings. Mr. Preston's quiet courtesy was a strange and alien thing in the mines. Although he longed for restful solitude, he never repulsed his kindly disposed neighbors. Indeed, they soon learned to respect him. Something about him appealed to the spark of manliness and chivalry in their bosoms. But Bessie won every heart, and many were the tokens brought down to Apple Jack's old cabin by the friendly hearted men for the little maiden. There could not be much variety in their gifts, for outside of nature, there is small store from which to draw in the lonely mountains. A sparkling stone, a cluster of wild flowers, were among the gifts offered for her acceptance. At last, it came to be the fashion to consider the tiny nuggets of gold sacred to the baby of the camp. Bill Myers gave her an orna-

mented buckskin bag to hold her treasures, and soon there were enough for her to rattle with great glee.

Two months after the Prestons had become accredited members of Fortune Gulch camp, it became necessary for some one to go down to Monte Christo Flat, fifteen miles distant, for supplies. Hitherto, all provisions had been packed up the mountain on the backs of the men. It was Absalom's turn to go, and Mr. Preston made a cordial offer of his team and wagon. The trail to Monte Christo was broad and safe for vehicles, so this was help to be thoroughly appreciated. In this way, enough could be brought at one trip to last a long time.

In due time, Absalom came back with a well-loaded wagon, in which, however, he had contrived to find room for a gift to Bessie, a coal-black Newfoundland puppy. He explained, in his awkward fashion, that it would not only serve as a playfellow, but when it was grown, it might be a protection also for the child.

Mr. Preston thanked him, saying: "It will be a comfort to Bessie, and God knows she may have sore need of a protector." The strange spasm seized him, and he pressed his hand upon his heart, while his face was convulsed with agony. Absalom started forward in alarm, as if to call for help, but he recovered himself, exclaiming, hastily:

"Don't say anything. It is all over now. I have these twinges occasionally."

Bessie and her puppy took to each other immediately. Somewhere, in her brief past, she must have known a dog, and kept his name in her memory; for as soon as he arrived she plunged her fingers in his black, shaggy coat, laughing and crying, "Pete, Pete." So Pete he became, and Pete he remained through many years of devoted service to his loved mistress. His intelligence, from the very first, was wonderful. He seemed to understand that Bessie was his special charge, and the way he would bark and fly around her, if anything approached, was funny enough. In later years, this fidelity was the marked feature of his character. Now, in these early days of their association, the two were babies together, and played with all the abandon of childhood. Little did Bessie realize the strange, unusual experiences in store for her in a future near at hand. David Preston felt the shadows deepening around his path, while hope itself seemed to mock him with visions never to be realized.

CHAPTER II.

A PRAYER FROM THE DEPTHS.

THE scenery in the California Sierras is wonderful. It seems as if nature, piling marvel upon marvel, had been trying experiments on a stupendous scale, each successive attempt outdoing the others. Old Ocean confesses the solidity of the barriers heaped in the way of his farther advance, and submissively kisses the sands at the foot of the mountains.

Fortune Gulch was almost in sight of the Yosemite Valley, containing, perhaps, more marvels than any equal area on the surface of the earth. Its outlying peaks were plainly visible. But in that day few eyes had ever beheld its stupendous majesty and exquisite beauty, save the Indians, who claimed it as their own.

At the elevation of five thousand feet above sea level, the early morning presents a strange, weird scene. The valleys below look like great lakes filled with billows of fog, surging and tossing restlessly, as if they were the ghosts of ocean waves. Above, the sky spans the earth with an intensity of blue, in strange contrast to the white-capped masses below. It is not the old, familiar world, but one transformed by some weird power. The sun

shines with calm radiance upon these dwellers on the mountain side, while on the lower levels the salt fog irritates and inflames sensitive lungs; for it is the Pacific itself invading the valleys in ghostly raiment of vapor. If the wind is abroad, the spectator on the heights sees the white billows roll grandly out through the defiles of the hills toward the ocean. On a still morning, it rises in drifting masses till dissolved by the all-conquering power of the sunlight. The silence can be felt. The only sounds are from the mining camps, the noises that betoken awaking humanity, and preparations for breakfast. These are not always in harmony with the surroundings. The rough and profane words that echo through the stillness seem doubly a pollution in the presence of the snow-white purity below. But it surges on, majestic, unsullied, while all around, in their eternal silence, the snow-capped peaks pierce the sky.

Oh, those mountains! To David Preston they seemed dreadful in their more than human expression. To him they were a horizon barrier, holding him a prisoner to his fate. In the sunset, they were wonderful in their stern majesty, lighting up with a glory of color that recalled to his mind the visions of the Apocalypse. The sunrise made them aglow with softer tints; yet at all times they were the symbol of an irresistible power, unpitying as fate.

Oh, for gold, gold, gold! Not for a miserly love of

the yellow dust, that accumulated slowly in his buckskin bag, but for the release it would bring from these terrible imprisoning mountains. Beyond, toward the sunrising, lay home, mother, all—save only Bessie—that made life desirable. The story of his life, with sunlight and black shadow in swift alternation, lay behind him. He would not dwell on that, lest memory should unnerve him for the present conflict. But, oh, for a mere fraction of the precious metal that was hidden among these mountains! The hills kept their secret well, not yielding it to every chance comer. He must find it soon; enough at least to take them both to that far-away, blessed home. The high altitude was slowly, but surely, fastening a death-grip upon his heart. The terrible spasms of pain were becoming more and more frequent. Home! How the word seemed to echo and taunt his longing soul! He would search yet again and again. God must be merciful, and not permit him to die among those rough men, with Bessie, his darling Bessie, unprovided for, and far away from the blessed refuge awaiting her coming.

But day by day his feverish labor brought no rich returns. A few dollars, at the best; on others, his gains were reckoned by cents. He was not wise in the science of gold digging; his life had been spent in far different pursuits. His thin face grew still thinner, and the haggard look in his eyes deepened.

One night, as Absalom was returning homeward at an

unusually late hour, his way leading him in the rear of Apple Jack's old cabin, he was startled to hear a man's voice under the pines, sharp with its agony of supplication. His first thought was of foul play; and pausing to listen he heard these words:

"O God, hast thou forgotten? Send help, I pray, and deliverance from this wilderness! Give my hands skill to find the hidden treasure in the earth. Let me live to take my innocent child to safe watchcare. O Lord, the God of my mother, and of my best beloved, turn not a deaf ear, but be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Sobs broke the supplication, and Absalom stepped softly by, feeling like an intruder on hallowed ground.

"I'll be hanged if thet chap wern't a prayin!" he said to himself. "Talked to God A'mighty ez ef he woz 'quainted with him too. Wonder what he wants so bad? I'd giv' it to him quick enough ef I had it!"

To Absalom's credit, be it said, that he told naught of what he had heard to his fellow-miners. He instinctively knew that the story would not be understood, and a hitherto latent sense of honor awoke in his breast. From this time on, he felt a sort of reverence for the man who was "'quainted" with the Lord Almighty. He watched, almost as anxiously as the man himself, for a "turn of luck," as he called it. But none came, and Absalom's kindly heart really ached for the longing, despairing soul.

The season passed, and autumn gave signs of her pres-

ence. This is not altogether a pleasant time for the dwellers on the hills. The morning fogs in the valley rise and wrap the heights in its chill whiteness. One looks abroad on a veiled landscape. Everything is hidden by a thick, white wall, impenetrable to the sight. The every-day world is scarcely to be recognized in this unfamiliar aspect. The damp chilliness is indescribable, piercing to the very heart. A strange depression seizes the sensitive soul, and a feeling of unreality possesses the senses. The sun has a sharp struggle in proving himself monarch of the rolling vapors, but at last he conquers, and the warmth of his beams is indeed grateful to the shivering dwellers upon the mountain side. All day he shines in golden splendor, until the lofty peaks hide him from view, only to find the battle renewed the next morning. Thus it goes on, until winter comes to take the sceptre, and lock up the gold in the frozen earth.

As the season advanced, Mr. Preston worked with increasing intensity. Any day he might strike a rich pocket, or a golden nugget that would enable him to fly eastward with Bessie before the winter should set in upon them. But each morning's eager hopefulness was met with bitter disappointment. He was fairly successful now, as success was reckoned in Fortune Gulch, but no heaped-up treasure of gold revealed itself to his longing eyes. He thought he should go mad with hope deferred.

The weather grew chill, and most of the men ceased

working their claims. It was too cold for Bessie to be taken with him, but leaving her with Pete for an hour or so at a time, he would hasten to the spot he was working and wash a pan or two of gravel with desperate energy. Hope died hard in his breast, and although he knew that the way by the plains was impassable at this season, yet there was the route by sea, if only he could scrape together the means to avail himself of it.

Meanwhile the camp was being thinned by the departure of the men who proposed to winter elsewhere. Some had gathered a goodly amount of dust, which they would fling away in wild carousal in Sacramento or San Francisco. Others hoped to find work in the valleys, and thus earn something for waiting families at home. David Preston saw them go in apathetic despair. Hope had departed, and for this winter, at least, he must be content to be imprisoned in the mountains. It must be right, or the Lord would have sent deliverance. For in the shipwreck of all else, he clung to his faith in God. Had it not been for this, he must have gone mad.

Absalom and Bill Myers were partners, or "pards," in the parlance of the mines. Their cabin was the best in the camp. They had a claim in common, which they worked together, sharing equally the profits. Absalom was a man absolutely without ties, while Bill Myers had a family in the East.

For two years the two men had been associated, and it

was a sort of unexpressed, rude attachment to Bill that kept Absalom at the mines.

One night, when they had escaped earlier than usual from the noisy attractions of Jem Flanigan's saloon, they began talking of David Preston and his child.

"I 'low," said Bill Meyers, "thet ole man Preston's a bit tetched. He don't seem to think of nothin' but diggin' gold, when the weather 'll let him, an' he looks slimmer every day. What on arth is goin' to become of him an' thet ere baby through the winter? Ef he's got folks, why don't he go to them, leastways long 'nuff to put Bess in a fittener place?"

"He 'lowed to me," responded Absalom, "soon arter they cum, thet he expected to git away afore winter. But he hain't made no sech pile ez thet would take, bein' as he is a green hand at the bizness. I know he's mighty flustered about it. I don't like the peaked look thet's growin' on him."

"Thet's so," answered Myers, reflectively. "I tell you what, pard," he said suddenly, as if a big thought had struck him, "we ain't none of us rich, but I'll be hanged ef I ain't willin' to chip in my share of dust to take them two innercents whar they belong."

"Your head's level, pard," replied Absalom, admiringly. "Thet's jest the ticket. I hain't got no wife nor babies East to send my dust to, ez you has, an' I'll give twic't what you do. We'll see the other boys to-morrer."

This conclusion reached, the two men tumbled into their bunks, their sleep doubtless sweeter for their consciousness of a generous intent.

The result of their interviews with the "boys" was a visit of Absalom and Bill Myers to Preston's cabin the next evening. They found him more haggard and worn-looking than they had ever seen him before. It was a little hard for Absalom, who had been appointed spokesman, to introduce his errand. He played with Bessie and Pete, and talked of every subject he could think of, until Bill began to be impatient, and gave him a significant nudge. Clearing his throat, he plunged desperately into the heart of his commission.

"Mr. Preston, me an' my pards, knowin' that you would like to go East afore winter shet ye in the camp, an' seein' as how Bess 'd be more comfortable like 'mong yer friends, hev chipped in tergether this yer bag of dust. Ye haven't struck it rich, as ye mought another season, when ye got the hang of things a leetle more, an' we hope ye'll take it kindly."

"Ye mustn't think," interposed Bill, "thet this yer camp wants to git rid of ye. It'll be powerful lonesome without Bess here," and the man's voice trembled, "but we're thinkin' of her good, an' yourn too. Ye ain't fit fur this hard life, an' as yer friends, we want to help ye out of it."

Absalom laid the bag of gold dust in Mr. Preston's

hand. It was far heavier than the little store he had labored so hard to gather. Speech utterly failed him. In the whirl of confused ideas and emotions, one thought alone stood out clearly: the Lord had not forgotten. He fell on his knees, unmindful of his auditors, and poured out such a flood of broken thanksgiving to God, that the men before him stood awed with uncovered heads, as in the presence chamber of the Almighty. Presently, he remembered himself, and rose with a face illumined. Grasping them by the hand, he said:

“Friends, for Bessie’s sake, I accept your gift. I will use it to place her in loving hands, and ask God to send his choicest blessings down upon every one of you.”

The words, solemnly spoken, seemed like a benediction; and Absalom and Bill Myers returned to their waiting comrades with tender, softened hearts.

CHAPTER III.

A MIDNIGHT SUMMONS.

THE report that had been brought by Absalom and Bill Myers regarding the thankfulness with which their gift had been received, impressed the rough miners greatly. As a rule, men dwelling long among mountain solitudes become imbued with a vein of superstition. So it was not strange that a vague idea of some mysterious blessing, or "luck," as they called it, took possession of their minds. David Preston and his little girl had come as a new and strange experience in camp life. The prospect of their immediate departure was regarded with sincere regret; yet not one of them would have lifted a finger to keep them in Fortune Gulch. The better part of their natures had been touched; and in their own exile, they rejoiced that it had been in their power to help these wanderers on their way home.

The next morning, it was noticed that there was no stir about Mr. Preston's cabin. They speculated and wondered until the hour grew so late that all in the camp became alarmed, and Absalom went to look into the cause. As he drew near, he heard Bessie's voice, crying pitifully. Entering, he found her vainly trying to

arouse her father, who lay motionless in his bunk. One glance revealed the truth. David Preston was dead!

Stepping to the door, Absalom called aloud for help, and soon the men were all in the little room. Bessie was sobbing out her fear and terror in Absalom's arms. The child was chilled through and through, standing so long over her father with no fire in the little stove. Wrapping a warm blanket about her, he took her to his own cabin, leaving the others to perform the necessary ministrations for the lifeless body. A warm breakfast revived and comforted the baby-girl to some degree, but she was restless and unhappy in her new surroundings, and the childish nerves had been sadly overstrained by the morning's experiences. Pete had been brought over, but she missed the care that had been ever present. "Papa! papa!" she wailed, until Absalom felt his own heart breaking with her baby grief.

Preparations for immediate departure had evidently been made by David Preston on the preceding night. The books were packed and placed beside a small iron-bound box, which was securely locked. The men surmised that this contained papers of value, and a key found in the dead man's pocket was laid away carefully for future use. Having made these preparations, it would seem that Mr. Preston had laid down to rest beside his little daughter, and had fallen into the sleep that knows no earthly waking. A look of ineffable peace was on his

face. The thin, worn features had lost their haggard, troubled expression, as if for him all perplexing, harrowing problems had been joyfully solved. His right hand was clenched over his heart, as though a fierce spasm had rent the silver cord and broken the golden bowl. But it had left no trace upon his countenance. Perhaps a beatific vision brought obliviousness of physical agony in the last supreme moment of earthly existence. David Preston had indeed gone home by a shining way that needed no golden key.

For him all trial was past. But Bessie, poor little orphaned Bessie! What was to become of her? To be sure, she had devoted friends in all the miners, every one of whom would do his best to serve her. Yet it was pitiful, such a baby alone in the mountains with men to whom home comforts were an almost forgotten dream.

"Jest the luck, an' nary woman in this ere camp!" muttered Absalom, as he awkwardly tried to attend to Bessie's varied wants. To put on her clothing was almost as perplexing as a Chinese puzzle, to say nothing of the other care needed. He devoted himself altogether to her welfare, while the others prepared for the interment of the dead. It was not thought best to allow Bessie to see her father again, lest it should awaken her terror and her longing for him anew.

They were by no means a religious folk, these miners in Fortune Gulch. They had always borne the reputa-

tion of being as hard a set as there was in this part of the mountains. They could swear, gamble, and drink, holding their own with any of their neighbors. That is, they could do this before the advent of David Preston and Baby Bessie. Even yet, they were by no means transformed, but there had been a gradual uplifting. Jem Flanigan, the keeper of the Fortune Gulch saloon, was the only one in all the camp who bore a grudge against the new-comers. In the lack of other diversions, he had reaped rich harvests each winter, scraping the hard-won gold dust of the miners into his greedy till. He had been at considerable pains to furnish amusement for these rough-and-tumble customers during the months of enforced idleness, expecting a usurious rate of interest for all trouble and outlay in the increased sale of his fiery compounds. The camp was continually changing. Few of the California miners stayed long in a place; but Jem Flanigan was always on hand in his chosen den, his nets spread for the present inhabitants of the cabins, whoever they might be. The unusual richness of the diggings gave Fortune Gulch a reputation that always insured a full camp. In the winter, those who had made their "pile" went to the States to see their friends, or to the cities to spend, most probable, their entire season's gains in riotous living. The steady, saving miner was a rare individual.

In the coming of David Preston, Jem Flanigan, for

the first time, found a rival. In Apple Jack's humble cabin, Baby Bessie held nightly court for a circle of admiring worshipers. Her pure innocence and childish loveliness dulled the appetite of the men for the coarser attractions of the saloon, with its liquors, and its atmosphere that savored of the pit.

A grave was dug beneath the beautiful pines that sheltered David Preston's late dwelling. When one of their own number had been killed in a drunken brawl, it was only consistent to bury him out of the way as speedily as possible. But it seemed very different in this case. The savor the man's brief life had left behind it made them reluctant to bury him without a word of prayer over his grave. An old prayer book that had been drifting about the camp was brought to light, and Ginger, the best reader of them all, essayed to read the burial service. With much stumbling, and strange renderings of unfamiliar words, this was done, and reverently the rude pine box was covered from sight.

In perfect silence, save for the noise of the shovels at work, the grave was filled up, and quietly the men dispersed, feeling as if Fortune Gulch was not quite deserted by God, with this prayer-blessed grave within its borders. The mountains stood as sentinels over the last resting place of the weary man, but no longer were they hopeless barriers, for his soul had soared above and beyond them into the mysteries of the infinite.

In one sense, his prayer had been answered, and he had gone home. Doubtless, in the clear light of the beyond he understood the meaning of God's dealings with him and his, and was content to know that out of all the trial and loss, the strange circumstances in which his child had been left would come for her a blessed fruition in after years; that to her tiny hand was given to lead lost souls up through the darkness and gloom to the light and joy that come from a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

All the rest of that day a solemn silence rested upon the camp. It was a significant fact that not an oath was heard from the lips of these men who had laid David Preston in his grave—men whose every sentence was usually spiced with profanity. Surely these rough, sin-hardened souls had been drawn nearer to the Father of all through the sacrifice of this man's life!

For once, Jem Flanigan's saloon was deserted. After the scenes of the day there was small desire for the rough attractions he could offer. Such utter solitude was something new in his experience, and it was not at all to his liking. He had a pleasant way with him when not crossed, and the men little realized what a demon of a revengeful spirit slept within his bosom, hard to quell when once aroused. Circumstances were beginning to waken it at this time, and if the miners had known all that would follow, they might have thought it best, for

Bessie's sake, to conciliate him. But they did not know, and left him to reflect in savage mood upon their desertion. Most of them were in Absalom's cabin, where Bessie, diverted and happy, was having a gay romp with Pete, while Absalom watched her with a heavy heart. What was to be done with the child? The others were dwelling upon the same thought, and discussed it in low tones. Never had such a problem been presented to them to solve. Was ever a little waif in stranger plight?

An examination of David Preston's effects revealed the fact that there was very little save the books, the box of papers, a single change of clothing for Bessie, and a few ounces of gold dust, besides the modest housekeeping outfit, the ox and cow, and the wagon. The papers were brought to Absalom's cabin for safe keeping, but the other things, for lack of room, were left in the rude cabin where David Preston had lived and died. The animals were kept in the little shelter prepared for them until it might be decided what disposition should be made of them. The men went about with the air of people burdened with grave responsibilities. It would be impossible for one, devoid of any experience of the kind, to exactly form an idea of the situation in which they found themselves. Most of them had been long absent from home. Some of them could scarcely remember when it was they had gone out from it. All of them had suffered from the demoralizing influences under which

they had come, but were not so far down as to be unconscious of the fact. And now to have this bright, innocent baby-girl committed, in such an unlooked-for and solemn way, to their charge,—the situation was unexampled and baffling in the extreme. How should they meet the demands the circumstances had created?

CHAPTER IV.

A PERPLEXING PROBLEM.

THE evening after David Preston's burial, the entire camp assembled, by appointment, in the cabin of Absalom and Bill Myers. The question of the child's immediate future was to be decided. The combination of circumstances made the situation an exceedingly perplexing one.

Bessie, bright-eyed and happy, was sitting for a while on Absalom's knee. Soon, wearied by the enforced quiet, with no chance for a romp, she fell asleep, and Absalom laid her gently in his bunk.

The discussion was an earnest one. All present evinced a kindly feeling for the little orphan, but the right conclusion was hard to reach. Jem Flanigan was there, ready with a proposition, but withheld it until he could see the drift of affairs. When he thought the right moment had come, he said briskly, like a man whose mind is quite made up :

"I'll 'dopt the child, pards. I'll take good care of her too, dress her like a lady, and keep her where any of you can see her any time you want to. Isn't that a fair offer?"

His motive to gain a superior attraction for the saloon was patent to every man there ; and the idea of her innocent loveliness in that gate of hell, fired them all with fierce indignation. A murmur of stern and unmistakable disapprobation arose. Bill Myers voiced the general sentiment by saying :

“No, Jem Flanigan, while I’m above ground, this yer innercent baby don’t go inter your place, nor any other like it. Ye get our money, an’ make devils of us, but here’s one thing ye can’t get, nohow. My pard’s got sumthin’ ter say, ef I ain’t mistaken, sumthin’ thet Bill Myers says amen to, every time.”

Jem Flanigan’s hand was on his pistol, and a fierce oath escaped his lips. But Absalom rose, and said, quietly :

“Put up yer shootin’ iron, Jem, an’ keep yer swarin’ fur sumwhar outside this yer cabin. Its our fault ef ye’ve made beasts of us, so don’t take offense.”

He turned, and drew back the blanket from Bessie, who was sweetly sleeping.

“Thet little angel, pards,” he said, in a broken voice, “kum right inter my arms when I found her cryin’ by her dead father. I kin hear her now, when everythin’ is still. She tuk right up with me, rough an’ ugly as I be. She loves ole Absalom, an’ while I live she shell stay with me, till the folks thet’s a right to her claims their own. Winter is most here, an’ I don’t see no way of gittin’ her to her folks at present.”

"Ther's orphan 'sylums in 'Frisco," suggested Ginger.

"No orphint 'sylum fur my baby, while Absalom's alive. Ther's no knowin' what they'd do with her down ther. When I've struck my pile, I'll find her folks, ef I kin. Till then, pards, she's mine."

"No, Absalom," exclaimed Bill Myers, "she's *ourn* fur this ere winter, anyhow. She'll be the light an' blessin' of the camp."

And so it was arranged. Absalom was recognized as Bessie's guardian, while every man, save Jem Flanigan, felt himself bound to do all in his power to make the wee maiden's stay during the weary winter just ahead of them, as bright as possible. All things for the child's comfort were moved over from the other cabin to her new home. As has been seen, the precious box of papers had been removed before. The bag of gold dust, which was to have given freedom to David Preston and his child, was laid away, by universal consent, for her future needs.

It was decided that the team and wagon should be kept for the use of the camp. The cow was needed to furnish milk for the child, and as sufficient feed had been brought up from below for their use through the winter, they would be no additional expense. Absalom built a little shelter behind his cabin for "Hornie," as the little cow was called, that she might be at hand, while the others agreed to look after "Tige." A rough shed, covered

with pine boughs, protected the wagon from the weather. All other things belonging to David Preston were stored in his old cabin.

At last, everything was arranged and the camp settled down for the winter. Bessie had times of crying pitifully for papa, but as the weeks passed away, she grew quite contented. Pete was a great source of delight. The men too, turned into the jolliest of playfellows. It was wonderful how the moral tone of the camp was changing. Absalom was a strict guardian. It was understood that not an oath was allowed in the child's presence. The language of the men became cleaner, and their thoughts purer. Of course, they did not reform at once, nor altogether. The long-indulged craving for Jem Flanigan's liquors was not removed. The men still drank more or less. But now the saloon was not the only place of resort to help along in the general effort to kill time. As Absalom would not leave Bessie, except when it was absolutely necessary, it became quite the fashion to play checkers or other games in his cabin, a very different place from the old saloon.

Jem Flanigan raged inwardly, but was too politic to show offense before the men. He cursed the child in his heart for coming between him and his gains. I am afraid if it had come in his way to do her physical harm, without danger of detection, he would have done it. Absalom alone perceived that he held a grudge because

of his failure to secure Bessie, and his watchful guardianship never relaxed its vigilance.

One day, Bill Myers brought out the little box of papers.

"P'raps we kin find out som'thin' about whar Bessie belongs," he said. "We hain't no right to keep her here arter spring opens ef the facts kin be traced."

"That's so, pard," responded Absalom. "She's of good fam'ly—I know the signs—like her father afore her. It's mighty queer he never said a word so that we could know in case he wuz tuk off suddin'. He had them spells with his heart, off an' on, all the time. But I s'pose he woz so sot on takin' her home hisself, that he just couldn't bear to speak."

"I allers shall think thar woz a mighty interestin' story back of his comin' here," Bill Myers went on to say. "He warn't no miner; enybody with half an eye cud see that."

All this time he had been undoing the fastenings of the box, and having done this, he inserted the key that had been taken from the pocket of David Preston after his death. It fitted perfectly, and presently the lid was lifted, disclosing neatly arranged papers and letters. Some were business-like, important-looking documents; while carefully wrapped, was a daguerreotype of a lovely woman. There was writing on the wrapper, but neither of the men was scholar enough to read what it said.

For the same reason, they could make little of the papers.

"There's not a man in camp thet's larnin' enough to read them ere papers," said Absalom, except it's Jem Flanigan, an' I wouldn't trust 'em in his hands fur all the gold dust I could wash out in a year. Put 'em back, pard, and in the spring I'll take 'em to Sacramento, an' git some lawyer chap to tend to it fur Bessie."

"Jem cud do it," said Bill Myers, thoughtfully, as he carefully replaced the papers and picture. "He's allers ready to write letters fur the men as can't do it fur themselves."

"Yes, 'cause there's a little gain in it, an' it gives him a chance to larn all 'bout yer affairs too. I'm bound he don't have the handlin' of this yer matter, ennyhow."

The bag of gold dust, the contribution of the men to send the Prestons East, and which had reverted to Bessie, augmented by the amount found among his effects, was put in and locked up with the papers.

"Thar," said Absalom, "that shall take the lamb home to her people, ef we kin find out whar they are. But it'll well-nigh break my heart to give her up. I hain't no kith nor kin that I knows on in the world, an' she's jest taken the place of all on 'em."

The winter rains on the plains of California are snows in the mountains, often falling deeply and heavily. Then come the terrible avalanches, which thunder down

the slopes, overwhelming everything in their course, be it unwary travelers, or human habitations. The dwellers at Fortune Gulch often heard their deep roar, but so sheltered was the group of cabins by overhanging rocks, that they had little fear of such a catastrophe as being buried alive. Yet fresh meat for the camp was obtainable only by hunting; and expeditions of this sort were attended with danger. But the men, weary of the confinement and inactivity, gladly took turns in going out after game. Many were the stories told of hair-breadth escapes, not only from snow-slides and slippery trails, but also from the fierce grizzlies and mountain lions.

Absalom had formerly been among the boldest and most successful of the hunters. This was his second winter at Fortune Gulch, but now he could not be persuaded to try his luck.

"No, pards," he would say, when urged to go and leave Bessie with the kind-hearted and obliging Bill Myers, "the little gal needs me, an' ef I should git taken off, she would be left alone agin. You would all be good to her, but seein' ez I've 'dopted her, I'm goin' to try an' hang by till sumthin' better turns up fur the child. I'll buy ammunition fur the rest on ye to shoot, ef ye'll let me off from doin' any of the shootin'."

Absalom's reason was satisfactory, and he was left to stay by his charge in peace. The winter was a severe one for California. The snow fell to almost unheard-of

depths, and roaring fires were necessary to keep the cabins comfortably warm. But Bessie was allowed to feel no discomfort. The cabin had been patched up until it kept out quite effectually the cold, searching wind. Pete seemed to understand his duty, and was almost human in his intelligence. She had rude toys in abundance, carved out for her amusement by her willing servants, the miners. Besides all, she was naturally a bright, sunny-hearted child, and under the watchful tenderness of Absalom, realized nothing of her strange, anomalous position.

The chief anxiety of this faithful guardian was in regard to Jem Flanigan. The old miner, like many of his kind, was a shrewd reader of character, and a close observer of those about him. In Jem's effusive flatteries, he detected a false note; and on one occasion, when the saloon-keeper had come to the cabin on some ostensible errand, he caught his eye fixed on the child with an expression of revenge and hate, even while his lips were smiling and framing playful words. Bessie shrank from him as from none of the others, and this intensified the bitter feeling in his heart against her. For some reason, best known to himself, he tried to win her liking; he brought her sweetmeats such as none of the rest could give; but warned by some instinct, the little one would have nothing to do with him.

As he turned to go, his eyes shot forth such a look of

baffled rage, that Absalom resolved to watch her more closely than ever. After Jem Flanigan had gone, he threw every one of the sweets in the stove, fearing that some harm lurked in them for his darling. Bessie had innocently made an unscrupulous and powerful enemy, and Absalom realized that he would have need of all his wits if he kept the little girl safe from the wiles of her adversary. Never had he so longed for the spring, and winter's reign was but fairly begun. He confided his trouble of mind to Bill Myers. That individual only laughed at his fears.

"Sho, pard, yer gittin' as fanciful as a woman over that baby. What could Jem Flanigan hev agin an innercent like that? Yer surely off the track this time, pard."

But Absalom knew better. He said no more to Bill, keeping the matter in his own heart. His vigilance was unceasing, for he felt sure that a blow of some sort would fall, sooner or later. If it was within human power, he would guard her from it. His loving, faithful soul was sore distraught. He wished, sometimes, that he was "'quainted" with David Preston's God, that he might ask for help stronger than his own. But he did not know the way to the throne, and so he watched on alone.

It is singular how men are led. What strange instruments God uses, and in what unexpected ways. Absalom watched on alone, and yet somehow that prattling baby

that filled his rude cabin with an unwonted music, made him feel at times that he was not watching alone. Somehow he felt that the God with whom Mr. Preston was "'quainted" would not forget his offspring. So, though formally he could not find his way into the King's presence, and would have scouted the idea of his trying to do so, he was comforted a little by his intangible thoughts, which were in themselves a prayer.

CHAPTER V.

CHRISTMAS IN THE MOUNTAINS.

HOLIDAY seasons are not much observed in the mining camps, save as excuses for prolonged carousing. The spirit of them is forgotten in the wild carnival. Christmastide brings no suggestion of its holy associations, unless to hearts linked by ties of worthy kindred in far-away homes. But this winter a new order of things seemed to reign in Fortune Gulch. Scarcely had December begun, than the camp decided that Bessie must have a Christmas tree.

The California miner rarely does things by halves. In his generous impulses, as well as in his wickedness, he shows a lavish hand. In this enterprise there were peculiar difficulties in the way. Mountain resources are limited, especially in winter. But a few determined souls can accomplish wonders in spite of obstacles. So absorbed did they become in planning something worthy of the occasion, that Jem Flanigan was less necessary than ever as a caterer of amusements.

The saloon-keeper was shrewd, and saved his popularity with the majority of the men by entering with a great show of enthusiasm into the scheme. He so managed that the

talk and planning should be, for the most part, at his own place. As Absalom would not leave Bessie, Jem Flanigan gained a controlling power in the matter almost before he knew it, and the other men were blind to his real motives. Bessie's guardian was in sore perplexity. He knew he could not convince the rest of Jem's duplicity with the proofs he had to offer, since he had so signally failed with Bill Myers.

He felt as if the toils were gathering about his helpless charge, and he alone realized her danger. And really, he himself could not have told what he feared. An intangible something threatened her, he was assured, but the men would scout his fears, should he express them, as fanciful.

It was finally arranged that a Christmas tree should be placed in the saloon, which was really the only room in all the place large enough for the purpose. Ginger, and a Scotchman they called Bob Burns, presumably in honor of his famous countryman and poet, volunteered to go down to Monte Christo, when the weather and state of the trails would admit, and buy the best assortment of gifts they could find. A fund was subscribed for this purpose, of which Jem Flanigan gave twice as much as any of the men. Absalom was unable to fathom his deep-laid scheme, but remembering the look of malice and hate, was convinced of its existence. He might refuse to let Bessie go on the grand occasion, but that

would never do, for it would not only alienate the men on whom he must rely in case of trouble, but give Jem Flanigan a plausible excuse for open hostility.

Poor Absalom! It seemed to him that fate had placed him in the strangest plight. He, grizzly, rough, and wicked as he was, in charge of such a cherub! He laughed aloud at the thought, but there was little merriment in the laugh. The situation was too grave. Bessie had entwined herself about his heart strings as the only thing within his memory that had ever loved him; and it might be that even he would be powerless to keep her from harm, though he would gladly have laid his life down for her sake.

Then he began thinking about her father, and the two prayers he had heard.

"David Preston woz on speakin' terms with the Lord," he said to himself. "Mebbe ef I woz thet, he could help me in this ere thing. It passes my time o' day!" And the old miner scratched his head in a puzzled, reflective manner.

Two weeks before Christmas, beautiful weather came. The sun shone brightly, the winds were hushed, and the snow was in the right condition for traveling. Winter journeying in the mountains is always dangerous, but in such weather the danger is the least. The two men appointed set out for Monte Christo early one Monday morning. Just before starting, Jem Flanigan called Gin-

ger into the inner room of the saloon, and gave him a letter to post in the town. A few minutes later, the men were on their way, none of the miners left in Fortune Gulch knowing aught of the letter entrusted to their messenger.

The trip was a hard one, and would take them the greater part of the day. The next would be spent in resting, and in executing their commission; so that no one expected them back before Wednesday night, at the earliest.

In the meantime, the weather changed. Tuesday morning they awoke to find a chill wind blowing from off the Pacific, surcharged with moisture, which, at that high elevation, must fall in snow. All day Wednesday the gray pall overhung the mountains. But as it did not really snow, only in gusty, intermittent fashion, the Fortune Gulch miners did not feel great anxiety about their comrades, confidently expecting to see them by nightfall.

But the grayness turned to blackness, and the night wore into midnight, and still the absent ones did not come. When the morning dawned, a fierce storm was raging, and deep concern filled all their minds.

"Mebbe they got ez fur ez Pietown Gulch," said Bill Myers. "That's half-way, ye know, an' they kin wait over thar till the storm's over, and the trail's so they kin git over it."

“To be sure,” responded Absalom; “but how kin we be sure they’ve reached Pietown at all?”

“It’s no use tryin ter look fur ’em in this ere tempest,” said Dick Nolan, one of the miners who had dropped into Absalom’s cabin.

“Ginger an’ Bob Burns ’ud git through, ef enybody c’ud,” remarked Bill Myers. “Ef a snow-slide ain’t struck ’em, they’ll be here.”

For three days the tempest raged. Such a storm could scarcely be remembered by the oldest mountaineer of them all. The roar of the avalanches echoed here and there above the roar of the elements. The hearts of the men at Fortune Gulch grew heavy with anxiety for their absent mates.

On the fourth day the sun shone out once more. The wind had fallen, but the deep snows had filled the trails and hung in threatening masses on the sides of the mountains. Every tree bore its load of shining whiteness, and the wild Sierra region was transformed as by a magician’s wand.

If aught could have been accomplished by going in search of the missing ones, brave hearts would have been ready for the undertaking. But the trails were obliterated, and nothing could be done but to wait. Certain death awaited the daring wayfarer on the mountains in this overwhelming depth of snow. Bill Myers was firm in his belief in the sagacity of the men, insisting that

they were in safe quarters, only delaying until the trails were passable.

Just a week later, Ginger and Bob Burns, looking weary and worn, came into camp. Theirs was a strange story of detention and mishap. They had been prevented from leaving Monte Christo until noon on the Wednesday they were due at home; but they pushed on, intending to reach Pietown Gulch, if possible, before night. Each had a heavy load, and it was hard traveling. A snow-slide directly across the trail detained them some hours, making a detour necessary; and nearly exhausted and frozen, they reached the half-way camp about dark. Then the storm came, and made them prisoners, as Bill Myers had conjectured; and when at last they had ventured to start homeward, the way was still well-nigh impassable. Their snow-shoes had enabled them to cross the drifts, but they were in constant danger of taking false steps, which would plunge them down the precipices, while so many snow-slides were falling around them, that they despaired of ever getting to camp alive. But here they were, and Bessie should have her Christmas, after all.

"Little the baby 'll 'preciate what her Christmas 'll cost," said Bill Myers to Ginger, as they sat by the stove in Jem Flanigan's saloon.

"She's welcome to my part of the costin'," Ginger answered, heartily. "But we thought, more'n once, ez fur

as the Christmas doin's depended on us, it 'd be a mighty slim showin'."

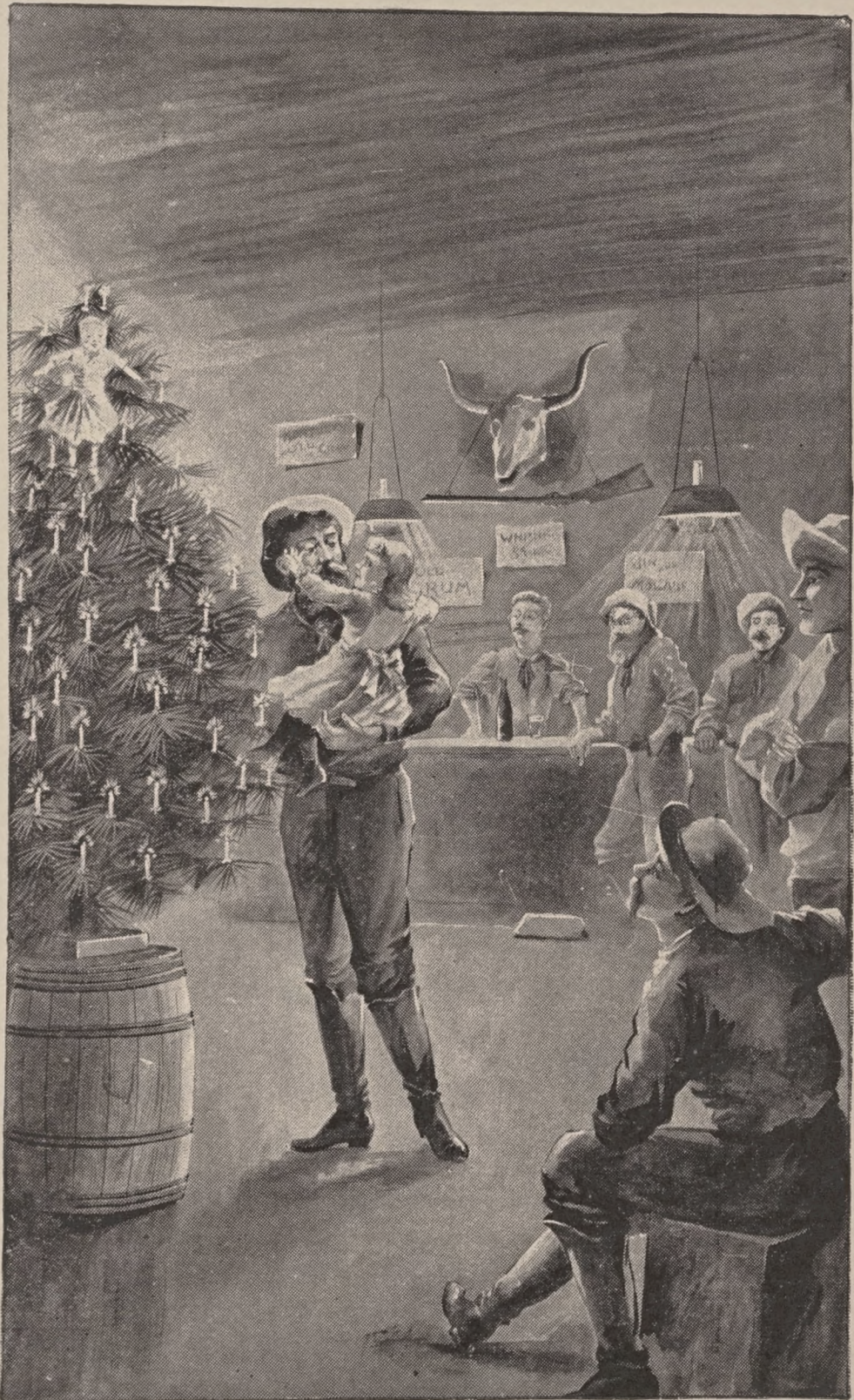
Ginger and Bob Burns had indeed brought a great variety of treasures from Monte Christo at the peril of their lives. There was no lack of trees in the immediate vicinity, and on Christmas day a finely shaped evergreen was placed in position in the saloon, and the men enjoyed greatly the rare privilege of decorating it, and hanging the various things brought up from Monte Christo. Jem had carried out his purpose of having his place the central point of interest, but the men, absorbed in their new occupation, quite forgot to refresh themselves as often as usual at the convenient bar.

When evening came, the tree stood laden with its pretty fruit. When all things were ready, a deputation was sent to escort Baby Bessie to the wonderful festal scene arranged in her honor. As she had no warmer head gear than the little sunbonnet she had worn on her first arrival at Fortune Gulch, Absalom wrapped her well in a blanket, and carried her in his arms—most reluctantly, it must be confessed—to the Christmas tree in Jem Flanigan's saloon.

They all watched her eagerly as Absalom threw off the protecting blanket and held her up to view the wonderful sight. She gazed in speechless surprise for a moment; then, clapping her tiny hands, her voice rang out, gleefully: "Pretty! pretty!" Then her arms were

stretched out toward it, oh, so longingly! for there on the topmost bough was a lovely doll, almost as large as herself, dressed, and smiling down upon her like a living playmate. Her delight roused her friends to wild enthusiasm. First, the big doll was placed in her arms. She kissed it again and again, held it off to get a better view, then fell to hugging and kissing it, as if suddenly awakened to her former loneliness. Then, as she sat in Absalom's lap, the treasures were heaped about her. Toys of every description, a warm cloak and hood, a gold necklace, candies by the wholesale, till the little maiden was fairly bewildered by the extent of her possessions. Absorbed in watching her delight, the men did not take note of Jem Flanigan's brief absence from the scene. Yet he slipped away out into the darkness, like the beast of prey that his wicked heart fitted him to be. His purpose accomplished, he slipped back among the merry crowd.

After the tree had been despoiled of its load, Bessie sat contemplating her new acquisitions for a little space; then, slipping down from Absalom's knee, and taking a mug full of candy, she traveled around the room, gravely laying a piece in each man's hand. It seemed as if the child realized in some dim fashion that Christmas shared is doubly Christmas. The sweet graciousness of her manner took them all by storm. Tears were in some eyes. "Bless the baby!" "The idea uv hur a dividin' with us!" and like expressions, were heard on every



Fortune Gulch.

hand. The child had given them all a glimpse of the real Christmas joy, and a sweeter lesson could hardly have been brought to their hearts. Bessie was God's messenger to this mountain camp, drawing the souls of these hardened men nearer the source of all purity and truth.

Emotion grew strong in Bill Myers' heart, and he rose to make a speech.

"Pards," he said, "I jest believe I'm asleep an' dreamin'! Six months ago, eny man thet hed a prophesied sech a Christmas in this ere camp 'ud hev got knocked on the head fur his pains. Fortune Gulch is a good ways off from God A'mighty, but sence he's remembered us, an' sent this ere little angel, we're gittin' nearer home. Hev ye all furgot how to sing, boys? Jine in the chorus, ef ye can't do no more." And in a rich baritone, Bill Myers struck up:

"'Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home."

His pronounciation savored of the mines, but the melody came out true and strong. Several voices joined him, and when they came to the chorus,

"Home, home, sweet, sweet home!"

some of the voices broke, and some faces in the company looked as if they were beholding the ghosts of departed joys.

But the occasion was taking a very different turn from what Jem Flanigan had purposed. Sentiment and tender associations were not helpful to his line of business. With a half sneer, he said, attempting a jocular manner:

"Come, boys, this is no way to keep Christmas. The little gal has had her time, now let us have ours, a regular old-time jamboree, without sniffing and psalm singin'. I'll stand treat to the hull crowd."

Absalom, rising, put the pretty hood and cloak on Bessie, who laughed delightedly.

"It's time the child was asleep, pards," he said. "Ef ye'll excuse me, I'll take her home."

"Queen Bess! Queen Bess!" they shouted. "We will all take her home!" And greatly to Jem's rage, the entire party left to escort the baby, whose power in the camp rivaled his own.

He shook his fist at the departing group.

"Never mind, little lady," he hissed between his shut teeth. "I've carried out my plan in one thing to-night, and it'll be many a long day afore that old hypocrite, Absalom, finds out where you belong."

A few of the party returned, and there was some drinking. But the wild Christmas carousal, for which Jem Flanigan had hoped and planned, with its guilt and debasing influence, was mercifully spared to Fortune Gulch by the simple presence of a little child. Already the investment the miners had made, led by feelings of

humanity toward a little child, was making a rich return. They had no thought of this. Any suggestion that they were getting better pay than when washing the precious dust from the shining sand, would have been laughed at. And yet they were getting returns as much better as manhood is better than money.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MISSING PAPERS.

PERHAPS we shall understand Absalom's relation to Bessie more clearly if we pause for a glimpse at his history. He was a character, unique even among the many queer types found among the pioneer Californian miners. He once had a name that pertained to civilization, but it had dropped from him so long before, that it is doubtful whether he himself could have recalled it without an effort. For thirty years he had been knocking around the world, and he had come to California in the first wild rush for the gold diggings. Bereft of father and mother, he had been a pauper boy in his childhood, experiencing all the bitterness that falls to the lot of those "bound out" by the town. His master had been a hard-hearted, close-fisted old farmer, with a still stonier wife, who meant that the full value of meagre fare and scanty clothing should be wrung from the boy over whom the law gave him full control.

Such an awkward, tall, scrawny lad as he was! His clothes, always either too large or too small, enhanced his air of being generally disreputable, and not a soul was found to give the boy a sympathetic, kindly word. When

he was fifteen, smarting under an undeserved and brutal whipping, he ran away, and the scenes of his childhood knew him no more.

Since that time he had literally been a waif. For men with no ties of kindred or affection become as truly waifs of humanity as friendless children. In the stern battle for existence he had learned to be shrewd and calculating. With no safeguards against vice, he learned to do as his fellows did—drink, gamble, swear, and on occasion fight. He was naturally good-natured, but when angered was swift to action, and his fellow-miners learned to respect his physical courage and power.

His master had always compelled him to wear his hair closely shaven; and when he had made himself the arbiter of his own fate, he vowed his hair should grow long, in memory of the indignities to which he had been subjected. That it exposed him to remark, or ridicule, he cared not. Early in his history as a California miner he had been dubbed Absalom; certainly not for his manly beauty, but on account of his flowing locks. As he wished to drop his old name with his old life, this suited him as well as anything, and the soubriquet had clung to him through all the years.

It must have been that Absalom had been originally possessed of a brave, generous heart, else after all this cruel time of soul-hardening, Bessie would not have touched his better nature as she did. Little she cared

that his hair was long, unkempt, and streaked with gray ; that his face was as rugged as the mountains, and his tall, ungainly form somewhat stooping. Her childish intuition went straight to the heart of things, and her absolute trust in Absalom's faithfulness was not betrayed. Under happier auspices, the boy would have grown up a rare, tender soul ; but even in this late autumn, the Father permitted a childish hand to start into life the delayed blossoming. It was gradual, but in the fulness of time it was made evident to the world.

Bessie slept well after the unusual excitement of Christmas night. Absalom was conscious of a great sense of relief, as he saw her safely at rest with her doll close beside her. A load was lifted from his heart, and he was half inclined to laugh at his own fears. But he could not banish them altogether. He understood Jem Flanigan too well to believe that he would lightly lay aside a grudge once taken.

Bessie was very happy with her new possessions. She had been bountifully remembered, and many a child in more favored localities would have envied her abundance. Her doll was her chief treasure. She would talk and sing to it by the hour, quite neglecting poor Pete, who looked as mournful as if he had lost a friend.

"Never mind, ole feller!" said Bill Myers, consolingly. "She'll cum back ter ye agin. Its the natur of woman-kind to be tuk up with sumthin' new. But she'll find

thet a livin' playfeller's better than a make-believe, arter all."

This kindly bit of philosophy failed to comfort poor Pete, who was desolate at losing the first place in his little mistress' affections.

The winter passed on, and soon there were signs of the coming spring. Absalom and Bill Myers talked much of the proposed visit to Sacramento, and the light that they hoped would be thrown on Bessie's history and belongings. One day in March, when the blustering wind was making all the uproar possible, Absalom took a fancy that he would like to examine the box of papers once more. It had been placed under Bessie's bunk to be out of the way, with no thought of concealment, for miners were proverbially honest, and there could be no motive for any of them to interfere with it. He stooped down to reach it, but it was gone. He rubbed his eyes, thinking they must have played him false. Yet nowhere could it be found, although Bill Myers bestirred himself to aid in the search.

Absalom was overwhelmed. The loss was beyond expression. Without the papers, Bessie was, indeed, a lost waif, stranded on the California mountains, with no clue to her home, her friends, her history.

He sat down and tried to think. He remembered seeing the box on Christmas morning, but not since that time. Who could have had any motive in taking it?

To be sure, the bag of gold was there, as all the men knew; but who among them would rob the baby? One name came with persistent reiteration to his mind—Jem Flanigan. He, and he alone, had been guilty of this thing.

His only chance for the theft had been on the night of the Christmas tree. He could have easily absented himself during the excitement long enough to secure the box, and return without having been missed.

Thus did Absalom reason the matter out to himself. With his head bowed in his hands, the chain of thought went on.

The existence of the papers, and their importance as regarded Bessie's future, had been a favorite subject of discussion among the men. Indeed, Jem had once offered to read them for Absalom, but he had declined, saying that he was going to put the whole matter in a lawyer's hands, who could attend to the entire business.

Then Absalom remembered a visitor to the camp, as soon after Christmas as the trails were safe; a man who was half trapper, half Jew, and altogether a villain in appearance, and evidently an old acquaintance and pal of Jem Flanigan's. Had Bessie's guardian known of the letter carried by Ginger to Monte Christo, the chain of evidence would have been complete to his mind. But this link was wanting in his knowledge, although he shrewdly suspected that the fellow's visit had something to do with the missing papers.

In his own heart, he was firmly convinced that the saloon-keeper had sought this method of revenge, and righteous indignation waxed hot within him. He could not contain himself, and laid his view of the matter before Bill Myers. That individual was at first incredulous. But Absalom's intense conviction, and the chain of circumstances placed before him, had their effect, and he became a convert to his partner's opinion.

Bill was never quick at coming to conclusions, but as he thought it all over, his wrath kindled. His natural caution served him in good stead at this juncture.

"The villain," he hissed, "ter rob a baby like thet 'ud take the devil hisself. But pard," he continued, in a quieter tone, "we must be keerful or he'll dodge us, fur Jem is a sharp un. The boys 'll hev to hev proofs afore they'll take up this ere fight, an' we've got to show 'em to a demonstration. Ef they's onct convinced thet Jem's the man, they'll string him up quicker than he kin say his p'rars."

"But we must find out what he's done with the papers afore we choke off his wind fur good an' all," remarked Absalom.

"Sure, sure, he's got to confess. But we must move mighty keerful, pard, an' I don't just see what to do, neither."

Bessie, unconscious of this crisis in her fate, was playing happily about the cabin. The shadows were gather-

ing darkly about the horizon of her future, but blissfully ignorant of the impending peril, she sang her little songs, and put both Pete and the doll under tribute to her amusement. Absalom watched her, with a fierce pain gnawing at his heart.

"It's a cruel thing, pard," he said at length. "It 'ud a been more marcifol to hev tuk her innercent little life, than to hev spiled all her chances."

And it was, indeed, a deeper harm than mere physical injury would have been. To doom a pure, happy child to a dark and uncertain future, when love and a blessed home were awaiting her, was, as Bill Myers had said, an act worthy of the arch-fiend himself.

Through the day, as opportunity offered, Bill Myers spoke privately to the men, one at a time, with injunctions to perfect secrecy.

"Thar's to be a meetin' at my cabin to-night. Say nothin' to nobody, but gin three raps, an' when the door opens, say 'Bess' as a password."

Bill's grim face, as he delivered his message, was enough to assure the miners that something of unusual importance was on hand. Before night, every man in the camp, fifteen all told, had received his invitation, excepting, of course, Jem Flanigan. The saloon-keeper was uneasily conscious of a mysterious something in the air, but so great was the caution observed, he gained no hint of the actual facts in the case.

After dark, one at a time, the miners slipped into the cabin, each surprised to see so many present. Bessie was in her usual place on Absalom's knee, while his face was gloomy and set. Bill Myers had lost none of his air of stern determination, and it was evident that weighty matters were on hand. Blankets were hung over the two windows, and at each rap, Bill opened the door a mere crack until the mention of the password proved the outsider's right to enter.

A spell of silence seemed to have fallen upon them all. In absolute stillness each new-comer was admitted. There was no talking; there was none of the usual exchange of the chaff of the mines.

When all were assembled, Bill Myers addressed them. Through the long day, as he had mused over the matter, the fire had burned in his soul.

"Pards," he said, in a low, deep voice of concentrated feeling, "we hev in our midst a traitor an' a thief. He hesn't stole our gold, nor spiled our lives worse than killin' of us outright. No, pards, this yer black villain didn't rob folks his own size, thet cud shoot back an' send him to his master, the devil. He hez robbed our baby, stolen the papers thet woz worth mor'n twice their weight in gold; the papers thet woz to hev told us whar to find her folks and her home. The bag of gold dust ye all gin her father thet's dead an' buried, is gone too, pards; but thet's nothin' side o' the papers."

The men listened in blank astonishment. It was a hard thing for them to take in or understand. Presently Ginger strode to the front. His speech was blue with profanity ; but this was not surprising under the circumstances. The only wonder was that Bill had been able to leave out the oaths, the usual intensifiers of speech, laboring, as he was, under such excitement. But Absalom had insisted on clean talk in the presence of Bessie, and, unconsciously, he had been learning to leave off swearing.

Ginger, in words well spiced, demanded to know whom Bill Myers had been driving at in his speech, swearing by all that was good and bad, that he should be sent where he belonged.

"Tell the story, pard," said Bill, turning to Absalom.

Rising, with Bessie still in his arms, and drawing his tall form to its utmost height, he told the story in a simple, straightforward manner, and with an intense earnestness that carried conviction to every heart before him. Bob Burns interrupted him once to ask :

"An' why should he hev a grudge again the bairn?"

"Because, mates, she hurt his business. The worse brutes he cud make of us, the more gold dust thar woz in his till. Afore she cum, we hedn't nary other place to pass away the time in when we wozn't diggin'. We woz a goin' down hill ez fast as his cussed liquor cud drive us. Sence Bess cum, we've been a growin' more human-like, an' thet didn't suit Jem Flanigan, not a bit. Don't

ye remember how he tried to git Bess and keep her in the saloon? He's hed a big grudge ever sence he failed in thet ere thing. It's my 'pinion thet he worked fur thet Christmas tree jest to git a chance at thet ere box. An' besides, he 'lowed ef we woz all there, he cud turn it all into a big drunk, like ole times in the camp. He woz mighty riled when ye all turned out to bring our baby home. I seed him on'ct a looking at her. I told Bill all about it. But he couldn't b'lieve it then. 'Twos when he woz here and guv Bess some sweets she wudn't take. When he went out, unbeknownst to him I seed his eyes sot on her with a look like the look of the arch-fiend himself. I b'lieve he'd a killed her if he could. I made up my mind then to watch him close, and I b'lieve with all my soul he knows all about thet box."

"Let's tie him up, an' turn his ole shebang wrong side out, an' find the box," suggested one of the men.

"I tell you, pards, the box ain't nowhere round these diggin's," said Absalom, with positive emphasis. "Don't you remember ole Leviticus, thet rascally Jew thet woz up here arter Christmas, an' mighty thick with Jem? He tuk thet box to a safer place than this yer camp 'ud be, arter it woz missed. No, boys, thet's no go."

The wrath of the men had reached white heat. They broke out into loud curses and threatenings.

"Softly, softly, pards," said Bill Myers. "Jem will find out we mean bizness quick 'nuff," making a signifi-

cant gesture around his neck. "But we must work it keeful, an' make him tell what he's done with the papers."

Quiet once more reigned, but it was the quiet of men stern with determination. A leader was chosen, a rope procured, and noiselessly the group of miners, all save Absalom, filed from the cabin, straight to Jem Flanigan's saloon.

CHAPTER VII.

A HASTY DEPARTURE.

THE company of stern, determined men was on its way, purposing to be judge, jury, and executioner, all in one. For retribution is apt to be speedy in the mines. The processes of law were too uncertain and dilatory to suit men too far from courts to depend on their protection. Let belief in a man's guilt take possession of the minds of his companions, and often he had brief time for shrift or prayer. A stout rope and a convenient tree satisfied the claims of justice, and served to impress those that remained of the advisability of keeping carefully in the paths of rectitude, according to the frontier code of morals.

Bill Myers was the leader of the party. They entered the saloon with faces on which Jem Flanigan might have read his doom, had he been there to see. But it was empty and deserted. The guilty man had fled.

Jem Flanigan had not been easy in his mind since Christmas night, when, as Absalom had shown, he had slipped out in the excitement and purloined the box from the cabin. He knew the temper of the mining camps, and the swift vengeance that is apt to fall upon trans-

gressors. The theft was planned weeks before, the letter Ginger took to the Flat being a summons to "Leviticus," the villainous-looking Jew, whose brief presence in the camp has already been noted. This man was a congenial spirit with Jem Flanigan, being ready for any dirty work that brought a fair reward. Through Leviticus, Jem had sent the box to another rascal of their fraternity, living in Sacramento, where he carried on a sort of low, pettifogging business in behalf of his companions, when they were dangerously near incurring the penalties of broken law. The saloon-keeper felt no reproach of conscience for the cruel thing he had done. He believed himself absolutely safe from suspicion; yet, cowardly as to the result, he watched for the discovery of its loss with some apprehension. He marveled greatly that it had not been missed, and so long a period having elapsed, he began to feel quite secure. No man had been more lavish in attention to the little maiden, and the Christmas-tree plan was a shrewd idea with a threefold object. First, it would prove his devotion to her interests, would give him an opportunity to gain possession of the box, and would make the saloon the central point of attraction once more. The last object had signally failed; the box was his, and he hoped that the first would prove his sheet anchor in any perilous times to come.

He did not know that Absalom's keen eye had penetrated his mask, and was reading his malice and hatred.

Had he known this, he might well have dreaded discovery. No earthly power had availed to keep him in the camp could he have seen how his innermost thoughts had been laid open before the eyes of this man whom an all-absorbing love had made wise.

On the night of the secret meeting, he was at first nonplussed to find the saloon utterly deserted. Where were the men? The coward his knowledge of his own guilt had made him, he resolved to solve the mystery. As he started forth, he saw the last man enter the cabin. The darkened windows, the perfect secrecy that attended the meeting, intensified his apprehensions. He crept up softly, stealthily, to one of the windows, where the blanket, slightly pushed aside by mere accident on account of the crowd, gave him a partial view of the proceedings. Bill's speech was spoken too low for him to hear. But as the excitement deepened, he could hear much of what was said. As the general feeling of indignation found expression, and he heard his own name uttered with rage and threats, his face blanched, and his knees shook with terror. How had they found him out? One thing was certain, he must get out of Fortune Gulch as fast as his feet could carry him.

Absalom and the child were in direct range. Should he shoot and complete his revenge? His hand was on his pistol, when he reflected that this would only precipitate matters, and probably spoil all his chances for escape.

Sweet as it would be to take this final action, the love of life was sweeter, and self triumphed over every other consideration. He had not a moment to lose.

He hastened back to the saloon, gathered all the gold dust he had on hand, and a few papers. A noise from without warned him of the necessity of immediate flight, and through the rear door he plunged into the darkness, hastening down the cañon as fast as he dared, without light to guide him. There was but one trail in the winter that was open to travel, the trail to Monte Christo. No sane man would attempt the journey in the snowy season in the night, except as in a case like the present, when life or death hung in the balance.

The would-be dispensers of justice were wild with rage at being thus foiled of their punishment. A thorough search of the premises was made for Jem Flanigan, but, as we know, he was beyond their finding. An examination of the place showed that the gold was all gone, while the disordered and scattered papers proved that his flight must have been sudden.

"How on airth," roared Bill Myers, "did the ole raskil ever git wind of this ere thing? He's clared out, thet's sartain."

"Let's spile his ole shebang," said Ginger, seizing an axe. Crash it went into one keg of liquor, then a second! He had it raised over a third, when Bob Burns caught his arm.

"Don't waste good whisky, pard. It's hard to git up here in the mountains."

"We would be better off without it," said Ginger, crashing again into the fiery liquor.

"Wait a minit," said Bill Myers. "It ain't no ways likely Jem 'll ever show his face in this ere camp agin. It won't spite him none ef we burn the hull thing up. I've a plan in my head, pards; wait till I've got it clear, an' then you kin vote fur or agin it, as ye like."

"Ef we kin ketch Jem Flanigan, he'll cum back here agin, whether he likes it or not," said one of the men, grimly.

"Thet's so," responded Bill, "but in thet case, he won't be takin' much interest in his property in this camp. Leastways, he won't very long. He's robbed our Bessie, you know, an' it seems ter me, thet whatever is worth anything thet was his'n, belongs by rights to her. What do ye say, pards?"

"Bill is right," said Jack Piper, one of the most popular among the men. "Let's lock up the building, an' let him hev the keys till he is ready with that plan he woz talkin' about."

This was heartily agreed to, for Bill was the acknowledged leader in the camp, and was liked and trusted by the miners. Before scattering, however, half a dozen had formed themselves into a pursuing party, which was to be ready to start by daylight in pursuit of Jem Flanigan.

"Ef we ketch him," said Bill Myers between his set teeth, "let him look out, thet's all."

With the first gleam of dawn the search party was ready to take the trail. Bill Myers had been appointed leader, and Ginger and Bob Burns, the hardiest mountaineers in the camp, volunteered to join him. The trails were in fairly good condition, and unless there came a regular break-up of the snow, they hoped to make good time.

They reached Pietown Gulch before noon, only to learn that their man had been there, and had departed early in the morning. Their story caused a lively breeze of indignation among the miners in this neighboring camp. Well it was for Jem Flanigan that he was safely beyond their reach.

"It looked mighty queer," said one of the Pietown men, "his comin' here as he did. But he hed a powerful smooth story, an' like fools, we swallered it all. It won't be healthy fur him to show his face here agin."

The Fortune Gulch party tarried only long enough to take a little refreshment, and to rest their weary limbs a brief period before pushing on in hot pursuit. But the snow was becoming soft, and they could not get on so rapidly as they had in the forenoon. It was near night-fall when they reached Monté Christo Flat, and tired as they were, almost to exhaustion, they lost no time in making inquiries after the fugitive. His recent presence in the town was easily proved, and most of the people

who had seen him believed that he might still be there in hiding. No trace of him could be found after five o'clock. Having set other men to work to search the town thoroughly, our three friends sought food and shelter.

But all the labor was thrown away. Jem Flanigan might as well have vanished from the face of the earth, for no trace nor hint of his whereabouts could be found. No one had seen him leave, and it was evident that he was not in Monte Christo. After tarrying another day, to make doubly sure that he was not to be found, the three disappointed men turned their faces toward Fortune Gulch. They took care, however, to secure persons to watch for him in the Flat, so that he should find himself a prisoner if he ever passed through the town again.

They reached the camp without any trouble or hindrance. It was a grievous disappointment that Jem Flanigan had succeeded in making good his escape. Bill Myers took, however, a philosophical view of the matter.

"Never mind, pards," he said. "A feller as hez sold hisself to the devil, reaches the end of the rope arter awhile, and gits drawn in, an' sent whar he belongs. Ef we don't hev the job of givin' him what he desarves, somebody else will, an' thet afore long too. Things get evened up in this ere world, ef we cud only see the hull ov it."

And so matters settled down in the camp after the great excitement. They missed the opportunity the saloon

had given them of a warm meeting place as the cabins were too small for purposes of general assemblage. Bill's plan, as presented to the camp, was this:

He proposed that they should all pay a small amount toward the expense of keeping the room warmed and lighted, and that they should have it for a meeting place as before, and that all other profits that might accrue from the use of the place should be laid aside for Bessie. This plan met with universal favor, and the men took turns in making fires, and looking after the building. Another use was to be found in the near future, but of this none of them dreamed. Providence was leading them, step by step, to the better things he had in store. Perhaps, they little dreamed of the blessings that would come to the community in Fortune Gulch from the presence of an innocent child. They had not denied the cup of cold water to one of the Lord's helpless ones, and it was to be returned to them in richest measure. Even now the change for the better was very evident. Jem's absence was a saving element in the uplifting process going on. He had been their tempter, holding out the cup, and urging them to drink that which was bringing death and destruction to their souls. True, the liquor, enough of it at least, was still there, to be had for the asking; but it made a wonderful difference to have the constant temptation removed. It must be confessed, there was a daily call on the part of a few; but even they did

not drink nearly so deeply as they had in the time of Jem Flanigan.

Absalom felt an intense relief. The constant strain of anxiety while he was dreading something, he knew not what, from Bessie's sly and malicious enemy, had really worn upon him. Bill remarked the change, and often told him he was quite another man.

The winter gradually slipped away, and spring, with gentle footsteps, made her presence known upon the mountains. The snow melted, the genial sun coaxed the green things into life, and all nature rejoiced in the beauty of a Californian April.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WOMAN IN THE CAMP.

AFTER the loss of the box and its contents, Absalom felt that Bessie was in his charge for an indefinite period. It did not occur to him that there might be other ways of tracing her origin; so the trip to Sacramento was given up, and as soon as the spring was sufficiently advanced, the miners resumed their gold digging. Absalom hoped that perhaps extraordinary luck might enable him to replace the loss Bessie had sustained, that he might be able to take up the matter of tracing Jem Flanigan in the search for the missing papers. He was greatly puzzled to know what to do with the child during the day's absence at the diggings.

But Providence met this need in a strange, altogether unlooked-for way. An Irish woman, giving her name as Norah McGinty, dropped suddenly into the camp the week before work in the claims was to begin.

Of all the queer characters that drift into the mining camps, there is found occasionally a strange, nomadic creature, whom the instinct of unrest drives from place to place. Such an one was Norah McGinty, the elderly woman who astonished all the men by her sudden arrival.

Her clothing was shabby, yet there was an air of respectability about her. She had a jolly, bright way, and her ringing laugh was a welcome sound in Fortune Gulch.

"An' sure, byes," was her first greeting, "yees are not afther wantin' somebody to cook for yees, be ye?"

Of course, the miners would like to have a cook, but how could the matter be arranged? Bill Myers, as usual, was the first to think of a plan.

"I say, pards," he suggested, "Jem's clarin' out was a sure providence. Let the woman set up a boardin' house in the saloon, an' we'll all chip in, an' take our grub together."

The idea was received with enthusiasm. It is strange how the California miner, in his enforced exile from all that makes a home, reverences women. Some very surprising tales are told of the old days, when the gold mining was in its first feverish excitement, and women were a rare sight, even in the towns and cities. Life was a wild pandemonium. It is said, that on one occasion it was announced that an invoice of women's bonnets had arrived at San Francisco, and could be seen at one of the stores. The news roused a great excitement, and there was a rush from all directions to catch a glimpse of this reminder of the gentler part of humanity.

Another story states that as a missionary was preaching in a rude place he had managed to fit up for the purpose, one of the first men who had brought his family with

him, came with his wife and baby. The child cried, and the mother was about to take it out, when a miner cried out to leave the baby where they could hear such a blessed thing as its voice. It was better than any other gospel that could be preached to them. The baby stayed, and the minister, doubtless, had an audience with hearts made more tender than they would otherwise have been.

This explains why Bessie took such hold of the men in Fortune Gulch. It also makes plain how welcome Norah McGinty was in this rude camp. It would not be possible under the conditions of Eastern society.

It did not take this bright, handy Irish woman long to establish herself in her roomy quarters. The men built her a log addition in the rear for her sleeping apartment. The inner room of the old saloon was converted into a kitchen, and soon a pleasant, comfortable place was ready, where all had good, well-cooked meals awaiting them when they came in from the diggings. It was really another step upward; for now they ate sociably together, instead of each man by himself, in the old fashion.

The woman seemed to have had no past, so far as any reference to it from her lips was concerned. She merely vouchsafed the information that she had walked fifty miles over the mountains to reach the camp.

"I'd not a been here, if I hadn't," she said. "Niver a cint of money had I to pay me way. So it was walk or shtay wid me!"

Her shrewdness or good luck in selecting Fortune Gulch for her venture was soon evident. The men gladly paid a fair price per week for the rare comfort she gave them. She was neat, as well as a good cook; and the place that under Jem's dominion had been a curse and a degrading influence, was like a bit of home to these miners, unused to such privileges as she gave them.

Absalom watched her closely for a few days, and then, with a great sigh of relief, confided Bessie to her care through the day. The warm-hearted Irish woman opened both heart and hands to the child.

"Bless her swate heart!" she exclaimed. "Sure an' it'll be company fer me when ye byes is gone to yer work. Nivir a bit of bother she'll be at all, at all, Mr. Absalom."

The offer of pay for this service she indignantly scouted.

"No, indade! What d'ye take me fer? Haven't I seen how yees all were doin' for the stray lamb, an' isn't it Norah McGinty wants a bit of the blessin' as is sure to come? I tell ye she'll be a comfort. So go along wid ye!"

Bessie took to her new friend amazingly. So, in process of time, as spring fairly opened, Absalom took the child, together with Pete and her toys, to the boarding house every morning, and trudged away after breakfast with a light heart to the claim he and Bill Myers were working. And surely his confidence was not misplaced.

Norah McGinty was very tender in her care of the little waif.

In her intervals of leisure, she would take Bessie in her arms, and croon over her some Irish ditty, or talk to her in a loving, wistful fashion that might have given the men some clue to a past life that had known both home and children. When she was busy, Bessie played indoors and out, as she pleased, but was never allowed to stray beyond the watchful eye of her guardian.

If the camp could have remained just as it was, it would have been unique through all that region for its good order and morality. But there was always an influx of miners with the opening season. The fame of the Fortune Gulch diggings insured a large camp in the summer, and this time the number flocking in was nearly double that of the preceding season. Of course, there were hard and reckless men among them, and for a time it seemed as if the old order of things was in danger of returning. A villainous-looking fellow, a German, appeared on the scene with a stock of liquors, for which he built a shanty a little way down the gulch.

The fame of Mrs. McGinty's cooking gave her nearly all the men as boarders; and here it was that her real character came out strong. The neatness of her house, the tidy table, and her unfailing cheerfulness and good nature, gave her a great influence among the miners. When they came in tired and hungry, she was untiring

in her efforts to minister to their comfort. She would clear the long table in the evening, and invite all the "byes" to sit in the cheerful, well-lighted room. How she ever did so much work was a constant marvel. Besides providing their meals, she washed and mended for the men, cared for them if sick, and exerted a decidedly wholesome influence.

Poor little Bessie was in serious want of clothing. The slender stock she brought with her was in sad condition. Her new friend put the well-worn garments in as good order as possible, kept the tangled curls neat and pretty, and was almost a mother to the forlorn child. After a while, she persuaded Absalom to let her have the charge of Bessie, by night as well as day.

"I know I ain't fit to take keer of a little un like thet, ma'am," Absalom said, "an you've done wonders by her. I shan't forgit it in a hurry. I can't giv' her away, 'cause she's only in trust like to me till I kin find her folks. She's jest a part of myself, ma'am, sence the day she cum inter my arms cryin' over her dead father. You've heard the story. I'll furnish the gold dust an' the like o' that, but I'll be glad to hev the little un under a woman's care."

At Mrs. McGinty's suggestion, Absalom went down to the Flat, taking the team and wagon and Bessie with him, to buy calico and other necessary things for new clothes for the child. He also laid in a stock of supplies

for the camp. The efficient little woman contrived, in the midst of all her work, to find time to make the garments, and, in course of time, wrought quite a transformation in Bessie's appearance. To be sure, the styles were rather old-fashioned; but the men were not critical, and Absalom thought her a charming picture, as she came dancing to meet him at night, with Pete at her heels. Norah McGinty had taught her to call him "Daddy," and she would shout it gleefully as far as she could see him. At meal times, she was always on his lap; and through the evenings she was the pet and life of the room filled with miners. Whisky Dick, in his saloon down the gulch, drew only the worst and most hardened of the men. Queen Bess, as they still called her, held nightly court for all whose hearts were not wholly spoiled by the dissipations and vices of camp life. Bill Myers had recalled his long-forgotten songs. Other singers had been found among the men; and music—the old, old melodies—echoed through the pines and down the cañon after the day's work was done. Bessie too, was developing into a rare little singer. Bill had taught her some simple songs, and she would stand on the table and warble away to an admiring audience. Doubtless, her presence, as well as that of Norah McGinty in the camp, made Whisky Dick realize that Fortune Gulch was not the place in which he could reap a rich harvest. He could not boast of more than half a dozen profitable

customers; so one Saturday night he closed out, and departed for a more congenial and convivial camp.

There was not much mourning over his departure, save on the part of his boon companions, and they formed such a small minority that they did not influence the general tone of the little community much. Most of them followed their caterer in search of more congenial surroundings, and Fortune Gulch rejoiced in knowing them no more.

Bessie was fast growing into a lovely child. Her physical development was wonderful. Her flow of spirits was continuous, and tears were an almost forgotten thing in her experience. Norah McGinty she called "Nanny," and in and out the cabin she ran the livelong day, singing and laughing till the air was full of music.

"An' sure it's no bird I'm afther a needin'," Mrs. McGinty would say, "for Bessie kapes up that warblin' that sometimes I'm clane distracted. It's swater than the birds, an' desolate Norah 'd be widout it."

And so the happy summer sped away. Absalom and Bill Myers moved their claim to a new spot, and were reaping fair returns. Absalom's bag of gold dust was steadily filling up, and Bill sent to his family generous remittances. An ugly debt that had driven him to the gold mines years before was now bidding fair to be exorcised forever, and this meant home for Bill. He had never been so homesick for them all as since Bessie had

come into the camp. One thing was certain—he would go back to his loved ones a purer, better man for the advent of the little maiden under such strange circumstances. Although her coming meant so much of sorrow to other lives, it was the dear Lord's own uplifting, not only to Absalom and Bill Myers, but to other reckless, hardened souls coming under her sweet influence. God holds the key to all these mysteries; and perchance his loving wisdom, seeing the end from the beginning, knew that it was worth all it had cost.

CHAPTER IX.

CHANGES AT FORTUNE GULCH.

THE summer flushed into autumn. Again the white fogs rose from the valley to enwrap the mountain sides. But winter was slow in coming, and the gold diggers kept at work much later in the season than usual. The morning dampness was unhealthful, and a cold wind blew down the gulch that chilled the miners, reluctant to leave their toil while the earth holding the precious metal was still unfrozen. Absalom and Bill Myers were somewhat protected from the cold, as the vein of gold they had struck on their claim ran downward, making a tunnel necessary in order to follow it.

Nothing had been heard of Jem Flanigan, although his description had been sent to all the mining camps in the near neighborhood. The tunnel was yielding rich returns, so that Bill Myers was rejoicing in the thought that the next summer would bring him release; and Absalom was happy in the fact that he was laying up gold for his darling. The other men, exposed to the weather, fared hard. One by one they came down with pneumonia, that scourge of the mountains. Mrs. McGinty had the sick ones brought to her own room,

where she tended them like a mother. The epidemic assumed a severe form. The doctor came up from Monte Christo twice a week, and left medicines and directions. Some of the men, discouraged and weak, were inclined to turn their faces to the wall, and give up the struggle for life. But Norah McGinty, who was proving a wonderful nurse, would not let them succumb to depression. Her rare brightness and cheerfulness came to the rescue.

“Don’t lose yees grip, me lad!” she would say. “Don’t ye dare say I won’t bring yees t’roo all right!”

In most cases she triumphed. It was greatly in favor of the men that the larger part of them had been of late leading temperate lives. Two poor fellows, liquor-soaked, their constitutions broken by excesses, died; but all the rest of the sick ones rallied, and were able to be about before winter came in good earnest. Absalom left his work in the height of the epidemic, in grateful remembrance of what the heroic little Irish woman had done for Bessie, and was a valuable helper in nursing the invalids.

Although the bright smile and cheery word had never failed from Norah McGinty’s lips, she had reached the limit of her endurance. One evening she sank down wearily, saying, brave soul that she was: “Turn about is fair play, byes! I’m goin’ to be sick now, an’ its a foine time yee’ll be havin’ takin’ me t’roo a round wid the pewmony!”

The last sick man in her charge was just able to crawl about feebly in weak convalescence. Her prophecy proved too true. She had literally worn herself out in behalf of the camp, and the disease assumed a violent form. The men vied in caring for the one who had been a good and faithful friend to them all. The doctor was once more summoned.

When he saw the sick woman, moaning and talking in her delirium of long-past scenes, he shook his head.

"She's past hope, boys. All we can do is to make her last hours as easy as possible."

Leaving opiates to ease her journey out of life, he mounted his mule, and returned to Monte Christo.

Three days later, a little procession filed out of the old saloon, reverently bearing her body, and laying it beside that of David Preston. Absalom felt as if the dead man would have had it so, could he know; for Norah McGinty had been a true and faithful friend to the orphan child he had left behind.

The burial service was again read; not by Ginger, for he had left Fortune Gulch, but by a new man, who was quite a "scollard," as the men said. They were not ashamed that the hot tears flowed down their faces, and they returned to their desolate boarding house, feeling lonely and bereaved. Poor little Bessie, a second time orphaned of tender care, mourned constantly for "Nan-

nie," until the whole camp was nearly broken-hearted over her grief.

"I tell ye what, pards," said Bill Myers, after three days of comfortless existence, "sumthin's got to be done! This yer camp's spiled fur gittin' along without a woman. I'm a goin' ter the Flat, an' see what I kin scare up. Look at Bessie here. She'll mourn herself ter death, ef she keeps on this way."

It was too late in the season for it to be comfortable traveling. Still, snow had not fallen in any great quantities, and Bill resolved to venture on taking the team and wagon. Early the next morning, he started on his way, the weather seeming propitious for the trip. On the fourth day he returned triumphant, with a ruddy-faced young Englishman, his wife, and baby girl, their few earthly possessions being in the wagon with them. The camp was naturally surprised at such an addition to its numbers, but they were very glad to see them, and gave the new-comers a hearty welcome. They were at once installed in the boarding house, everything possible being done for their immediate comfort.

Bill Myers afterward told the story of his experiences at the Flat, as follows:

"After I got thare, boys, I looked about, but nary thing cud I find but a Chinaman. We didn't want none of them yaller heathen in Norah McGinty's place, an' sez I ter myself, 'I'll jest look a leetle further.' Finally, jest

ez I woz a gittin' discouraged, I ran acrost this ere John Rose, I b'lieve he calls hisself. I found out he'd cum all the way 'cross the plains with the little woman yonder, hopin' to make a livin' at the mines.

"But not knowin' nothin' 'bout the kentry an' its ways, he didn't make 'nuff las' summer to keep body an' soul tergether. Then thet yer baby cum, makin' three mouths ter feed instid uv two. He'd got as fur as the Flat lookin' fur work, but it woz mighty skeerce. So I sez to him, likin his honest look:

"Cum up ter our camp, an' keep our boardin' house this winter. It'll be better nor doin' nothin', an' we're clean orphaned up thar.' Then I told him about Norah McGinty an' Bessie, an' he talked it over with his wife, an' they jest cum right along. Its a clar case of providence, I tell ye pards. I'm gittin' ter b'leeve in thet sort ov thing. I ain't pious, as ye know very well, but sum Higher Power than our'n hez hed a good deal ter do with this ere camp the past year.

"Everythin's providence with Bill lately," laughed Absalom. "But mebbe he's right. I ain't the feller ter dispute it arter all thet's happened."

The arrangement certainly did seem providential to all parties concerned. To John Rose and his wife it was a rift in a heavy cloud well-nigh black with despair. They were Christian people, and although their faith had been sorely tried, they had never lost their faith in God's

leading hand. This opportunity came in their extremity, and with grateful hearts they bowed in thankful acknowledgment of continued mercies.

They soon found they had entered a field rich in openings for actual missionary work. The way had been prepared before them by the circumstances of the year preceding. David Preston's brief life in the camp, with its silent testimony of a pure soul, his death, and the responsibility thrown upon them by Bessie's forlorn and helpless condition, her innocent presence among them, the removal of Jem Flanigan, with his degrading influence, even Norah McGinty's unselfish ministry, though without any hint of formal religion in it, had paved the way for more direct guidance to the Father of all.

Surely a divine hand must have led Bill Myers to Monte Christo in search of some one in their great need, just as John Rose came thither seeking for some way to earn the daily bread for himself and his little family. For the Roses had a mission to perform in Fortune Gulch, a mission far higher than Bill Myers and his companions dreamed. The providence, dimly comprehended, was leading them all by a way they knew not.

Before David Preston's coming, a religious man would not have been tolerated in the camp. Now, so great was the change, that there was little open opposition when it became known that John Rose and his wife were the Lord's servants of a positive stamp. Some of the men

welcomed them on this account—a surprising fact, in view of the past character and history of the place. But, with the departure of Jem Flanigan, the evil spirit of Fortune Gulch had been exorcised; and Whisky Dick, seeking to enter into the vacant place, found it not only swept and garnished, but well-nigh closed to his influence and that of his boon companions, so that they were driven out to seek another spot where holy influences had not penetrated.

John Rose, ruddy-faced, vigorous in his young manhood, impressed them all as a *clean* man. He was, in one sense, the same as themselves, poor, and compelled to work for his daily bread. There was no cant in his religion. It was as simply natural as the act of breathing. The miners, always ready with a nickname, dubbed him “Rosy Jack,” not from any disrespect, but in real liking and spirit of comradeship. And his frank response to their overtures of friendship placed him in a position of influence, rich in its power for good.

Mrs. Rose was at first timid and shy among so many rough-appearing men. But the chivalric reverence which she awakened in their hearts, and which was evident in every word and action, soon reassured her, and she grew into a hearty liking for the miners, and a deep interest in their welfare. Baby Jennie Rose, only three months old upon her first arrival in the camp, was re-christened “Rosebud,” and made the object of much admiring at-

tention. Queen Bess lost none of the loving devotion of her little court, and she shared it generously with the tiny new-comer. There seemed to be no jealousy in her heart toward the wee stranger. Her doll was nearly forgotten in her passionate love for this live playmate. Pete adopted Rosebud also, but his chief object of affection was Bessie herself. He was ever loyal to his own little mistress.

It was beautiful to see the three playmates together. Bessie watched over the baby with a motherly care that was both touching and amusing. A cradle had been improvised for Rosebud, and the greater part of the child's time was spent beside it. Pete would stay close at hand, ready to jump at the slightest expression of Bessie's wishes.

Well was it for the little maiden that she had once more a tender-hearted woman to exercise a loving watch-care over her. Mrs. Rose had not the strength, nor the marvelous executive ability that Norah McGinty had possessed; but, aided by her husband, who took charge of the management of the boarding house, the men found themselves better served than even the bright little Irish woman had been able to do. But their memory of her was exceedingly tender, and her reign had been a stepping stone from the former state to the present. Her ministry had prepared them for what was yet to come.

John Rose was a born singer, and his wife had a sweet

contralto voice, which, though not strong, was clear and pure. In the winter days and long evenings, when the time threatened to hang heavily, the men would ask them to sing. So the Gospel Hymns, then a new thing in the world, became a familiar sound in Fortune Gulch camp. There were only twelve men remaining on through the cold season, and as whisky was rarely called for, and cards had somehow somewhat fallen into disuse, other diversions must be provided. After a while, the boys caught the ringing melodies, and the holy words echoed out on the air and down through the cañon with an enthusiasm that might well fright away the spirits of evil hovering about, lying in wait to destroy. The effect on the men themselves could be marked. They were, perhaps, unconscious of it themselves, but they were gradually losing the taste for low and degrading things. For the sake of Bessie, who played among them constantly, they had learned to purify their speech, and, imperceptibly to themselves, this grew into a habit.

One who had known the camp in former days could scarcely have recognized it in its changed conditions. The old saloon, whose walls had been the scene of many wild revelries, and even crimes, was now given up to better uses. It would seem as if the Spirit of God were just without, waiting to enter in and take full possession.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord," was the burden of the prophet's cry once when he looked into the future.

The way of the Lord had been prepared in Fortune Gulch, and his footsteps were just at hand. Strangely he had wrought, and the workers had been unconscious of their parts; but all were more and more, with Bill Myers, beginning to feel the influence of a power higher than their own.

CHAPTER X.

A BLESSED FRUITAGE.

JOHN ROSE and his wife felt almost overwhelmed at times by the magnitude of the responsibility laid upon them by the opportunity placed in their hands. It was necessary to move carefully and wisely. Fortunately, they had been connected in England with a working church, whose pastor had trained his members in the various lines of Christian activity. The men around them had been well-nigh heathen in their rough life in the mines, and must be led gradually to better things.

Among their slender stock of belongings were some books and papers. Mr. Rose was possessed of a good common school education, and the men soon discovered that he was a "scollard." So he was eagerly asked to read to them in the long evenings. He willingly consented, wisely choosing first a story that was among his books, one that taught pure, good lessons of morality and truth. His auditors listened like those who had been half-starved for mental food, and they would have gladly sat up half the night to hear and be fed. But he was judicious in imparting this mental nourishment, and gave them just an hour of reading every night.

The next Sunday, seeing his opportunity, he said to the men, as breakfast was over :

"It's Sunday, boys. Don't you want me to read out of another book this morning? And then we'll sing a bit, if you say so."

Now Sunday, in the miner's calendar, is not notable for religious observance, and the men looked up surprised. It was really a critical moment, and John Rose lifted up his heart in a brief, silent prayer for guidance. Would they take kindly to an actual religious service?

The silence was really oppressive for a moment. It was rather a daring experiment, but the men had learned to have faith in "Rosy Jack," and presently Absalom said :

"It 'll be sumthin' new, pards, an' it won't hurt us to remember thet thar's a Sunday onct in a while."

This settled the matter, and when the table had been cleared away, Bessie established herself in her usual place on Absalom's knee, while the men disposed themselves in various attitudes to listen.

"It's an old, old book, boys," John Rose said, as he laid a large volume on the table before him. "Most likely your mothers know more about it than you do."

"Is it a Bible?" Bill Myers asked, curiously.

"Yes, and there is a story in it I want to read to you."

"Sho, the Bible ain't one uv yer story books," said one of the men, suspiciously.

"It has some of the best stories you ever heard," responded John Rose, promptly. "Listen here." And turning quickly to the Parable of the Prodigal Son, he read it with such effect that his audience hearkened with breathless attention. As he finished, the comments were various.

"That yer boy didn't strike it rich, did he?"

"His claim didn't pan out all he 'spected it would," remarked another.

"He wozn't wuth shucks ter go back on sech a prime ole dad back in the States," spoke up a third.

"See here, boys,"—and Absalom brought his heavy fist on the table with startling emphasis,—“this yer story means sumthin', an' it means us! I never had no dad sence I woz a little feller, but ef I had, I'd be blasted mean to take on ez that chap did. But don't ye see, pards, it means God! We've bin a gittin' all we cud out o' him, blessin's, an' sich like, an' we've gone jest ez fur ez we cud inter the devil's own kentry. An' thar's God, like the ole father, sayin', 'Boys, cum home, and welcum!' We all know a powerful sight what husks is too. Ain't that so, Jack?"

John Rose was trying to wink away a suspicious moisture that seemed to interfere with his sight. Then he said, briskly:

"Bless you, yes! You've preached the best sermon I've heard this many a day."

Absalom frowned. "I don't set up fur no preacher," he said. "They's skeerce in these parts. I woz only jest a tellin' ye what the story said ter me."

"Certain, certain!" said John Rose, soothingly. "You hit the meaning just right too. Now I've got a song I'd like to sing to you, if you ain't tired of me; a song and a story all together."

"Go ahead!" "Go it, Rosy Jack!" "We're a' listening!" were some of the approving responses from his audience.

So he sang to them "The Ninety and Nine"; not so artistically as Mr. Sankey would have sung it, but effectively, with a pathos that touched every one of the hearts before him; touched them all the more personally and surely, because the Good Shepherd sought the lost sheep in the lonely mountains.

"Thet's another story ez means the same ez the one ye read, Jack," said Bill Myers, brokenly; for the song had reached his music-loving soul, as a spoken word never could have done.

Then John Rose ventured a step further. "Shall we ask the Good Shepherd," he said, "to search for his lost sheep in our mountains?"

Reverently he bowed his head, saying:

"Dear Lord, the Good Shepherd of the sheep, we are a needy, lonely band up here in the hills. Come this way, and lead the wandering sheep back into the fold.

We are weak and ignorant; we do not know the way; but make us trust and follow thee, as little Bessie loves and trusts us. Amen."

Taking his Bible, he had disappeared before the men had time to recover from their surprise.

"'Pears like he's 'quainted with the Lord too," thought poor Absalom. "Mebbe if I'd had a chance, I cud hev bin a clean, good man too. Wonder if the Good Shepherd kin find sech a God-forsaken place ez this ere camp is? ~ But then," his thought went on, "ef he'd altogether gin us up, he wouldn't have sent Bessie here. She's one ov the lambs, sartain."

Lifting the child to his knee, he let her play at straightening out his grizzled, tangled locks, stopping now and then to stroke his rough beard, and hug him in an abandon of baby affection. The closing words of the prayer recurred to his mind. "Help us to trust and follow thee as little Bessie loves and trusts us."

"The little un does love ole Absalom, thet's sure," he thought. "How cud I ever love the Lord A'mighty thet way? Here I be, ugly as sin, an' wicked as I be ugly. What 'ud he want ov sech a body to love him? An' yet, the boy thet run away from his ole dad, in the story Jack read us, was all dirt an' rags when he put fur home. The father woz glad ter see him too. Well, well! It's a mighty big puzzle, enyhow!"

An unwonted silence had fallen upon the men. Chords

long silent in their natures had been touched as by an unseen hand, and the thrilling vibrations brought its measure of pain. Absalom was not the only one busy with serious thoughts. Memory was bringing back a far-away past, waking visions of things long forgotten.

Presently, dinner was placed upon the table. The meal over, a long afternoon lay before them. John Rose came to the rescue once more, and read aloud to them from the book they had been hearing during past evenings. He did not deem it wise to push the religious services any farther at this time. He had gone far beyond what he had dreamed possible in the morning, and he well knew that a single false step might undo all he had done. So he was content to wait, and leave the results with God.

In the evening, music was once more in demand, and the old hymns whispered sweeter lessons than ever before. A surprise was in store. Mrs. Rose had been teaching Bessie a new song through the week, and now, proud of her accomplishment, she stood on the table, and sang in words wonderfully distinct for such a wee girlie :

“ Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so ;
Little ones to him belong,
They are weak, but he is strong.”

Her childish voice, never before raised in sacred song, thrilled all the men.

"Sing it again, Bessie," said Absalom.

So she sang it again and again, in willing response to the wishes of her friends, until she was tired. To Absalom, the words emphasized the lesson of the morning, and led him a step nearer the light and truth. Thus ended the first real Sunday in the history of Fortune Gulch.

It was not the last, however. Step by step the good work went on. The stormy winter shut the camp in from polluting outside influences. Like leaven in the measure of meal, which works quietly and unseen, so did the Spirit of God work in the hearts of these men, who had become sin-hardened and aliens from their Father's house.

Absalom was the first one to yield. In one sense, the gospel was a new, strange story. Even in his childhood he had been shut out from religious influences, so that he had not sinned against as great a measure of light as most of the others. His heart opened to the truth with unspeakable joy and deep humility. He was even as a little child.

God had sent tiny, clinging fingers to unlock the barred gates of his soul. As they swung slowly open, with much creaking of rusty hinges, One entered in, thorn-crowned, to go out no more forever. Bill Myers was not far behind. God's providences had made him think, and then the words of a song had broken down the barriers of opposition, and he stood at last a free man in Christ Jesus. The chains of temporal debt were still upon him,

but never more could his soul be fettered by sin as in the past.

I wish I might tell you that every man in the camp gave up his opposition and became Christ's soldier. Alas, in every time of decision, some falter and draw back until it is too late! Nine out of the twelve stepped over the narrow line and stood squarely and manfully on the Lord's side. The Western miner does nothing by halves, and these men would henceforth be outspoken in defense of their faith, even though it led them to actual martyrdom among the rough, wicked population in the mining regions.

It was a wonderful work, all things considered. It was full of interest too, because so unpremeditated. But this was its strong point. No planned and openly announced work would have secured these men as John Rose's did. Gradually they yielded to the new influence before they knew whither it was leading them, and the winter of their sin and godlessness had melted away in a blessed springtime of God's love and grace.

Christmas dawned upon a very different camp. No tree or especial celebration was in course of preparation this time, for all felt it would awaken unpleasant memories. But it was a better day than the one of a year before, for now the Christmas joy was in almost every heart. The contrast between these two days was a very vivid one. Yet the good will shown the helpless child,

who had come among them on the earlier of the two occasions, was leading them up to the peace and gladness of the second festival.

Bessie was now almost entirely under the care of Mrs. Rose, as she had been under that of Norah McGinty. She had hung up her stocking on Christmas eve, a plan suggested by her English friends. A strange variety of gifts filled it on Christmas morning. Mrs. Rose had manufactured some extraordinary animals out of gingerbread, which gave the little maiden no end of pleasure. Small nuggets of gold, some queerly carved toys, and a buckskin collar for Pete, ornamented in Indian fashion, were among her remembrances. Each one of her old friends had contributed something toward the contents of the stocking. Although her gifts were not so numerous nor costly as those of the year before, they gave her just as much pleasure.

John Rose and his wife did the best in their power to give the men a Christmas dinner. All the desirable things for such a feast were not attainable, but the result was highly satisfactory to the guests, at least. There was abundance of good cheer, and a happiness and real light-heartedness which would have given a relish to the plainest food. The old English plum pudding graced the board, also game, killed by some of the men for this very occasion. Before the feast began, John Rose asked a simple blessing, as he always did now that the new

order of things made such a thing possible. Never had there been a jollier meal in that camp. Bill Myers came out famously as a teller of good stories, and laughter and happy cheer were the order of the day. That night, John Rose and his wife clasped hands, saying, "Thank God for the change in Fortune Gulch camp!"

CHAPTER XI.

TIDINGS.

IT was a blessed thing for little Bessie that she had come under such wise care. Bright, apt to learn, the former lessons of the camp would have been disastrous to her childish innocence and purity. Even Norah McGinty, while she looked carefully after her physical well-being, was a feeble guard against moral contagion. Yet she had served well the part that Providence had assigned her in Fortune Gulch camp, in paving the way for better things to come.

Janet Rose accepted the care of Bessie as a charge from the Lord. Her motherly heart ached over her forlorn, orphaned condition, and straightway she set herself to fill, as far as possible, a Christian mother's place. The child was just at the age where she needed religious teaching to save her from developing into a little heathen. Under her instruction, Bessie folded her hands to say her first nightly prayer. The little song, "Jesus loves me, this I know," was followed by others, which, as they became familiar, were sung to delighted auditors. The loving hand of the Father was evident in thus sending to the child, at this critical period in her development,

such wise, tender care to training her up in the knowledge of Jesus.

John Rose and his wife were convinced that Bessie was of no ordinary parentage. Her quick intelligence, her naturally lady-like ways, led them to this conclusion.

"I'm afraid, John," said his wife to him one day, "that hearts somewhere are aching for news of the child. If only those papers could be found!"

"Aye, Janet," he responded, "that's a big 'if.' But it's a comfort that the Lord rules, and that he will bring the tangle out all right in his own good time."

"Yes," she replied. "It isn't any tangle to him, and that is a comfort, to be sure. But think of the chances that she's losing, up here in the mountains!"

John Rose smiled. "Seems to me, little wife, that your last speech doesn't savor very strongly of faith. When the Good Father wants her to have any better opportunities, it will be very easy for him to bring them about. From what Absalom tells me, I think her father must have been a praying man; and you remember the Scripture: 'Yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.' She surely hasn't been friendless, and I know the little girl might be under far worse influence than yours."

"I won't doubt any more on her behalf, John. But I shall be very glad when the uncertainty about her future and her belongings is cleared up."

"So shall I. In the meantime, we will do the best we can for her, taking the work as sent from the Lord."

As spring approached, there came up the question regarding farther arrangements. The men were all anxious to have the Roses remain permanently in charge of the boarding house.

"It 'll be better than gold diggin' fur ye, Jack," said Bill Myers. "Plenty fellers cum inter the gulch fur the summer, an' ye'll hev a sure thing of it. Gold diggin's mighty onsartain work, and hard work too. Besides, Jack," he continued, patting the younger man's shoulder affectionately, "we can't spar ye. God's got a work fur ye in these mountains. I tell ye, it 'll be an everlastin' job holdin' some of the men level that 'll cum in here to hunt fur gold. Fortune Gulch hez got ter show up fur the Lord arter this, an' the Devil won't giv' her up easy."

And so it was decided. John and Janet Rose, and "Rosebud," the only name by which the baby was known among the men, stayed in the boarding house, and helped hold Fortune Gulch "level" for Christ. Not a man left who had been in camp through the winter. As the spring came, and the diggings opened once more, the usual rush ensued, and the conflict began between the powers of light and of darkness.

There was not a man but enjoyed the appetizing, tidy meals served by the Roses. Bessie and the "Rosebud"

were also unfailing attractions, innocent and harmless. But the atmosphere of the place struck the hardened and depraved among the new-comers as strange and uncongenial. They soon drew off into a clique by themselves, coming to the boarding house merely for their meals. The reading and singing were quite out of their line or liking.

“A perfect ole nest of psalm-singin’ snivellers,” one of them termed it, with a few more forcible adjectives thrown in for emphasis. A successor to “Whisky Dick” opened a saloon in the place he had vacated. “Game Bill” was the cognomen of this follower of Jem Flanigan, so called because one leg was somewhat shorter than its mate. Here he and his cronies held their wild carousals, in striking contrast to the quiet, orderly enjoyment of Jack Rose’s establishment. The latter place had its saving influence, as well. Young men, fresh from good homes, who had not yet forgotten their mothers, were drawn into this safer circle, and held by the power of unselfish fellowship. Older men too, who were not vicious, nor inclined to sin for sin’s sake, yet too weak to resist evil unaided, were kept out of dangerous associations by the watchful band of Christian workers. The devil had indeed come into Fortune Gulch, but now he did not have it all his own way, as heretofore. He might tempt, but God’s love in human hearts made them ready to succor the tempted. It was his own chosen and choice circle of

spirits that made a pandemonium in Game Bill's saloon. Souls not apparently past saving were often kept from his power.

Regular services were held on Sunday in the boarding house, to which all were invited and made welcome. John Ross, much to his own astonishment, had been developed by the exigencies of the case into a lay preacher. His quaint and homely presentation of Scripture truth exactly suited his audience, that would not have enjoyed a more polished and logical setting forth of the same things, nor would they have been profited as much by them. His influence was greater, because he had been the means of bringing most of them to the light. Now and then they found a man who had brought his religion with him to the mountains. But rarely was this the case. Nearly all the additions to the band of the Lord's soldiers were men who were led to feel the power of God through the prayers and efforts of their fellow-delvers for gold.

Such singing as grew out of these meetings! Bill Myer's rich baritone led all the rest of the voices. "Ninety and Nine" was his favorite. John Rose never sang it any more; for Bill gave it a pathos and power that never failed to touch his auditors. How his glorious voice sent the words rolling far down the cañon, until they penetrated even the "gate of hell" presided over by Game Bill. The sound often called forth curses, and the denizens of the place wished they could find some spot

beyond the reach of these heavenly sounds. Was it not akin to the feeling with which Dives looked from the eternal burnings, and saw Lazarus afar off, in Abraham's bosom?

"Ring the bells of heaven" was another favorite. The music won more attendants to the meetings than anything else; but once there, they were held to listen to the Bible truths that were able to make them wise unto salvation. Conversions were not infrequent. What else could be expected with such an earnest band of workers seeking for souls?

About the middle of the summer, wild excitement prevailed in Fortune Gulch. Absalom and Bill Myers, in prospecting for a new claim, struck a rich vein of gold on a little creek flowing into the larger stream. It was richer in immediate returns than anything before discovered in the gulch. Three days later, another vein was found close by the claim where David Preston had worked with the energy of despair. If he might have been the one to discover its wealth! So we reason in our weak human understanding, not realizing that the Wisdom that orders our ways is supreme, and that the best is always provided for his children.

The news of the discoveries spread like wildfire through all the region. The rush to Fortune Gulch was tremendous. The Rose boarding house could not begin to accommodate the hundreds who made application. Shanties

went up as if by magic; another boarding house was ready for patronage in one short week; and almost before anybody knew it, Fortune Gulch was a busy city.

The evil elements strengthened apace, as might be expected under the circumstances; but for all that desired to seek the good and shun the bad, John Rose's boarding house offered a safe refuge. It was the centre of Christian activity.

About this time, Hornie, the little cow that had done so much toward promoting Bessie's comfort and health, died. Much as they felt attached to Tige, the ox, Absalom decided that it was best to sell him and the wagon. This was an easy thing to do in the new prosperity that had come to the place. The amount thus realized was put away for Bessie.

Bill Myers was going home. His long, patient labor had been rewarded.

"I've made my pile at last, pard," he said to Absalom, the night before he was to turn his face eastward, "an' so hev ye. I kin pay every cent I owe, an' be a rich man still. But, pard, the best thing these yer diggin's hez brought us ain't gold, though thet woz needed bad, but the love ov Christ. I wouldn't hev been fit ter go back ter my wife an' the childern, ef it wozn't fur thet. We woz a goin' down hill fast, pard, afore thet day when David Preston cum in yer with thet baby."

"Thet's so, ole man," answered Absalom, wiping the tears away with his brawny hand. "God's bin good ter us sinners. I'm glad, pard, thet ye kin go home ter them thet's waited long fur ye. We've bin pards a good while, an' we've struck it rich tergether. I've got nobody but Bessie, an' now I must hunt up her folks. When ye git back East, ole man, jest keep yer ears open fur enybody by the name ov Preston, won't ye? I'm feared I kin never git hold ov Jem Flanigan, nor them papers, though I 'low I'll try. It seems ez ef I should die to giv' Bessie up, fur she's the fust airthly thing thet ever's loved ole Absalom sence I cud remember. But, in course, her fine friends wouldn't want a rough ole feller like me around their little gal. But now I've got the Lord Jesus Christ, I won't never be so lonesome eny more, even when Bess goes."

It will be seen that Absalom had perfect faith in the ultimate discovery of Bessie's friends. The how and when were hidden from his view, but his thorough confidence that they would be revealed in God's good time, was not to be shaken.

Bill readily promised to be on the lookout for any people by the name of Preston. Next morning, the stage, which had already begun running between Monte Christo and Fortune Gulch, bore him away from the scene of so much weary, discouraging labor, and from the eyes of the brethren who loved him for Christ's sake.

Even at this very time, the California papers contained the following advertisement :

“Information is wanted regarding David Preston and his little daughter Elizabeth, supposed to be somewhere in the mining regions. A liberal reward will be given for any facts which will lead to their discovery. If this should meet the eye of David Preston himself, let him rest assured that a loving welcome awaits him and his. Address all communications to Charles Preston, River Plains, Connecticut.”

All through the State this last despairing effort of anxious hearts to discover the whereabouts of missing loved ones was carried. Many read it, wondering idly who David Preston could be. It was brought even into Fortune Gulch, wrapped around a parcel sent to John Rose. Too hurried and busy to note its contents, he cast it idly by to meet its fate at the hands of Bessie herself, who tore it into fragments to see the breeze whirl it down the cañon, never dreaming what a priceless boon to Absalom's anxious heart it would have been. Thus did the child let the wind carry away the key to her place in the world.

CHAPTER XII.

A GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK.

BEFORE Bill Myers was fairly on his long journey eastward, by way of the plains, Absalom had kissed Bessie good-bye for a time, feeling that it was safe to leave her in the care of good Janet Rose. Times had greatly changed in Fortune Gulch. Women were now no uncommon sight in the place, while conveniences and even luxuries from the outer world were brought to their very doors. Absalom had sold his share of the claim for an amount that assured him independence for the rest of his life; and he might easily be reckoned a rich man. His whole thought now was for Bessie. All his wealth was valued for her sake alone, and he devoted himself with intense eagerness to the search for Jem Flanigan, and the papers that could supply the missing information in regard to her friends. Means were now at hand in abundance with which to employ all the resources of the law.

If he could only find the rascal, Jem Flanigan! Or, failing this, Leviticus might be able to throw light on the matter. He determined to consult the best lawyer in the city, and get his advice in regard to the wisest method of procedure in this difficult matter. He knew that gold

was a potent key when there are hidden mysteries to be unlocked. Gratefully he thanked God for giving it to him in such bountiful measure.

Absalom's first quest, after reaching Sacramento, was for a barber's shop. He emerged with his beard neatly trimmed, and with the long, unkempt locks shorn from his head. Having taken this first step toward a civilized appearance, he next visited a tailor's shop, where he purchased a neat business suit. When he emerged from his room at the hotel, having shed his rough miner's clothing, his best friends would not have known him.

After the transformation was complete, before going out on the street, he viewed himself in the glass for some moments with varied emotions.

"Absalom," he said to himself, "you've shed a good many things besides clothes. The ole name hez bin forgot so long, it 'll be like a new one. Richard Trent you are, Absalom, God helpin', a man among men at last.

And, indeed, our friend, Richard Trent, bore small resemblance to the Absalom of the mines. The long, tangled hair, now cropped close, had hidden a finely shaped head. His face was rugged, to be sure, but full of strength, with a suggestion of tenderness not at all allied to weakness. Conversion had brought out the innate fineness and gold of his nature. Bessie had been the first instrument in leading him toward the better things of the present, and

the transforming power of the gospel, which develops as well as uplifts, had made him a noble man.

Having made himself presentable, he was ready to see the lawyer. He had an idea that as Bessie's representative, it was incumbent on him to be as respectable in appearance as possible. He could not speak the language of civilization, to be sure, but he would guard his crooked tongue as far as in him lay. Perhaps the raiment of the outer world, which he had put on, would aid him in assuming more polite forms of speech.

His choice had fallen upon the most eminent lawyer in Sacramento. He was fortunate in securing an early audience with the busy man. Mr. Stanton was greatly interested in the simple, ingenuous way in which our old friend told the matter. By skillful questions the lawyer was soon in possession of the whole story of the occurrences at Fortune Gulch.

It was, indeed, a rarely fascinating case. Mr. Stanton was a man of quick sympathy, a trait not often found among eminent members of his profession. Perhaps the heart becomes hardened by the continual dealing with trouble and woe. Little Bessie Preston, left alone in a rough mining camp, at the mercy of the men, yet finding such loyal, true-hearted devotion, was enough to arouse all the chivalric enthusiasm of his nature. He was ready, not only as a professional man, but also as a friend, to do all in his power to unravel the mystery of her young life.

As he sat talking over the case, a sudden remembrance seemed to strike him. Turning to his file of papers, he soon found the advertisement to which reference has been made, and read it aloud to Richard Trent. After he had finished, he asked :

“Isn’t that your David Preston and his child, Mr. Trent?”

“I reckon it must be,” was Richard’s reply. “But how shall we go to work about it?”

“I will attend to the matter for you,” replied Mr. Stanton. “I will write out the dates you have given me, and send the facts on to this Charles Preston who has advertised for them. It will take my letter some time to reach him, and an equal length of time for an answer to return; but in such an important matter as this you can afford to have patience. If it were not for this clue, we should have been compelled to advertise in Eastern papers for the child’s friends, and that would have involved an indefinite amount of time.

“I don’t keer so much,” said Richard Trent, as we must now call him, “jest so we kin git her ’cross the plains afore winter. It ’ll break me all up when she goes, but thet ain’t nothin’ ter puttin’ her whar she belongs. Ain’t there no way ter git hold ov Jem Flanigan? Them papers mought be ov value aside from tellin’ whar her folks be.”

“That is true,” said Mr. Stanton. “I should like to

see the villain brought to justice, myself, and the papers ought to be secured, if possible. There is a detective agency here in the city, and perhaps we could get track of the rascal with its help. I should get out a warrant for Leviticus too; for, no doubt, he was in complicity with this Flanigan. I know the old reprobate. He is up to some dirty piece of work most of the time."

"Can't I git ye ter look arter the hull ov the bizness, Mr. Stanton? Thar's gold ter pay ye well for all the trouble, an' I shouldn't grudge most eny amount to git back that yer box."

Mr. Stanton readily agreed to act in the case for Richard Trent, and all necessary preliminaries having been concluded, he hastened back to Fortune Gulch.

As he descended from the stage, and walked through the narrow, straggling main street of the town toward the Rose House, as the place was now called, no one recognized him. And no wonder. This respectable man, with hair and beard well trimmed, and clothes that fitted his tall form, was surely a stranger in the place. Having reached the house, he opened the door and went in. Pete sniffed inquiringly at his feet, and then gave a joyful bark of recognition. Mrs. Rose came forward, wiping her hands, to meet the supposed stranger.

Richard Trent set down his satchel, and laughed.

"So ye don't know yer ole friends," he said.

The voice was familiar and unmistakable. "Why,

Absalom," she exclaimed, seizing his hand, "what have you been doing to yourself?"

"It isn't Absalom any more, ma'am," he answered, gravely. "Thet ole name hez gone with the ole life. I've gone back ter the name my father gave me, Richard Trent."

Just then Bessie came running in. She paused, and looked earnestly into the man's face. He smiled, and with a glad shout of "Daddy!" "Daddy!" she sprang into his arms. Yet she was puzzled by the change. She passed her hands over his face, and over his shorn head. It seemed doubtful whether she would really approve of the transformation. Richard held her close, and presently she gave a long sigh, and laid her head against his breast, as if assured that she was at home in his arms once more.

It was hard for the men to get used to his new name, and to his changed appearance. Absalom was manifestly an inappropriate name for this well-dressed, fine-looking man. John Rose called him Richard; his old mates shortened it to Dick; while the rougher men, supplying an adjective, called him Gentleman Dick. To any and all he answered, excepting only the old name of Absalom. That he had cast behind him at once and forever.

"Are ye goin' inter the diggin's agin, Dick?" asked one of the men the day after his return.

"No, I've made as big a pile ez I need, an' I'm through.

It's a dog's life, at the best, an' I'm goin' ter look fur a a different sort ov work."

While Richard Trent was waiting patiently in the mountains for results from the lawyer's efforts on Bessie's behalf, others were not idle. Slippery Jack, as his cronies called him, was otherwise known as John Means, a pettifogger and fourth-rate lawyer of Sacramento, to the general world. He had the reputation of being shrewd in handling the dirty side of a case, and in securing the acquittal of criminals on trial for transgressions against the law. To him had been consigned the box of papers Jem Flanigan had sent from Fortune Gulch by the hand of Leviticus. Unscrupulous in his methods, he had soon a full knowledge of the contents of the box. Realizing the great importance of the papers, and the possible results to the one holding them in possession, he kept a sharp lookout for anything bearing upon the matter. His watchful eye saw the advertisement inquiring after information of David Preston and his little daughter, and like the shrewd, calculating villain he was, he set his wits to work to see how he could cause it to turn to his advantage. The reward,—that was worth trying for,—his fingers itched to get hold of that, and there might be other material good growing out of it to the man who could supply the needed information. The papers gave him a clue to the necessity of discovering David Preston. Leviticus had told him nothing when delivering him the

box, and evidently he was expected to have no further part in the matter than as custodian of the package. He must find Jem Flanigan, or the old Jew, and without exciting their suspicions worm from them what he wanted to know. Where had Jem found the box? and were David Preston and the child tangible realities to be found in the California mines?

One thing prevented him from answering the advertisement. He could give no information whatever of the missing parties, and he might be called to account for his possession of the papers. That might have been a simple and easy thing for an honest man to explain, but involved as he was with all sorts of guilty secrets, it might be perilous to his interests to invite investigation. His only hope was to find Jem Flanigan, or Leviticus.

Thus it came about that there were two distinct lines of search for the ex-saloon-keeper of Fortune Gulch, and his crony and partner in crime, Leviticus the Jew.

John Means was a man of expedients. He recalled the fact that when the box was sent to his care, Jem was at Fortune Gulch, near Monte Christo. Thither would he first go in search of him. The chances were against finding him there, in this land of roving spirits. Still, it must be the starting point of his trail.

Therefore, one Friday evening, a little later, the stage set down John Means in Fortune Gulch. Flashily dressed, with a great paste diamond in his shirt front, an enor-

mous seal ring on his finger, he fancied he must impress the inhabitants with a sense of his importance. The town now boasted a thousand population, with half a dozen saloons. Mr. Means visited each of these in turn, ordered drinks with pompous grace, treated the crowd, and made inquiries for Jem Flanigan. But that personage was not behind any of the various bars, neither did any amount of questioning elicit information regarding him. The great rush into Fortune Gulch had occurred since Jem's time, and the present frequenters of the saloon had never heard of the man. Three years ago is often a buried past in a mining town.

Neither could John Means hear aught of David Preston. He was too shrewd to inquire outright, and he kept aloof from the Rose House, the very place where he might have learned all he wanted to know. But being told that it was the headquarters of a pious, psalm-singing crew, he avoided the place as altogether uncongenial to a gentleman of his stamp, little dreaming that thus he was missing the great object of his visit to the town. We know well what they could have told him: of the solitary grave down the gulch, of the friendless and yet befriended child, and the wrong which had been done her. But it was better that he should not learn all this, and that other hands should straighten the tangle that had crept into her life. After a week's stay, he went back to Sacramento, still in search of Jem Flanigan, and Leviti-

cus the Jew. He was now without a single clue to follow. But believing the old adage, "All things come to those who wait," he settled himself in his den, and kept a sharp lookout for any stray information that might enlighten his way. Had he known all the complications of the case, he would have realized something of the perils of his own position.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FINDING OF JEM FLANIGAN.

AND where was Jem Flanigan? He seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth as completely as if it had opened and swallowed him up.

Our last knowledge of the man was his hasty flight from Fortune Gulch, in the darkness of the night, fleeing from the vengeance of the men who had detected his crime. He knew the rope was in readiness to hang him, and he had no recourse but to risk his life out on the treacherous trail, rather than face his incensed companions. He was a rank coward, and his guilty conscience made the prospect of death a terror.

As we have seen, he could only follow the single trail that led to the Flat. No other was open in winter. Along this trail his pursuers would come, he knew, but he did not think they would be so foolhardy as to start before they had daylight to show the way. If he could only reach Monte Christo before them, he believed he might yet escape.

It was a fearful night's experience. Not for worlds would he have attempted this headlong plunge down the mountain in the darkness, were not the avenging men

probably close on his track. A single false step might hurl him down unfathomable depths. But on he must go, and as he staggered blindly forward, he bitterly repented that he had ever yielded to the temptation for revenge, and brought himself into this perilous position. He despaired of ever seeing the blessed light of day again, and yet he feared to see it, lest it should bring his pursuers upon him.

As dawn reddened over the mountains, he found himself not far from Pietown Gulch. His familiarity with the trail had served him well. He was weak and faint with hunger, and chilled to the heart with cold. But how could he account for his presence at that early hour to the men in this half-way camp? No sane man would make a night journey over the trail he had just traversed. He dared not wait until a reasonable hour before presenting himself, and he must have food, and a chance to warm his nearly frozen limbs, or perish.

His fertile brain invented a story which might gain credence. And boldly showing himself to the astonished camp, he told them he had started from Fortune Gulch at noon the preceding day, intending to pass the night with them in Pietown. A snow-slide had nearly buried him alive, and with great difficulty he had extricated himself, and worked his way across to the open trail. Night had overtaken him, and he had well-nigh perished while feeling his way onward in the darkness.

The appearance of the man corroborated his story. He told it in a way that gave it an air of probability, and the men believed him. Warmed and fed, he prepared to push on. They remonstrated, saying he needed rest after such hardship. But he refused to stay, declaring that pressing business called him to the Flat.

Little did the men imagine the nature of his pressing business. Escaped from their kind attentions, and revived by the food and warmth, Jem Flanigan hastened on, reaching Monte Christo by noon.

Well was it for him that he had hurried on. Before noon, the pursuing party had reached Pietown Gulch. We have seen how he eluded them and made good his escape, leaving them to return to their camp, disappointed and disgusted with their failure.

It was mid-afternoon when Jem Flanigan left the Flat. He slipped out of town so quietly that no one noticed him as he took an obscure trail leading up into the mountains, in a direction opposite to that leading to Fortune Gulch. He reasoned that the men in pursuit would naturally look for him in Sacramento, or "Frisco," as San Francisco was called on the coast. He could not afford to run any risks, and disappeared so effectually, that he left no trace behind.

On he traveled, from one camp to another, as the weather would permit, till at last he located himself in a place well up the valley of the Sacramento. The saloon-

keeper had just been killed in a drunken brawl, and Jem happened along in time to take his place. As the dead man had no friends within the knowledge of the camp, it considered itself his heir in the matter of the possessions he left behind. Jem Flanigan, passing under the name of Patrick Maloney, bought the establishment at the nominal value set by the men, paid for it in gold-dust, and was once more king in his chosen domain. He had no fear of sharing the fate of his predecessor.

“Whar thar’s shootin’, boys,” he would say, “it’s the first shot that’s after killin’, an’ I ginerally gits the first shot.”

He was surely safe, he thought, from this other danger that was far more threatening than a drunken row. Was he not far up in the mountains, where only the most adventurous and daring penetrated in their search for gold? Patrick Maloney, of Sugar Loaf Camp, certainly could never be identified with Jem Flanigan, wanted at Fortune Gulch to answer for a crime that was beyond the pale of forgiveness.

The new man must be fond of Sugar Loaf Camp, the miners thought, when he refused to leave it, even in the opening summer, to replenish his stock of liquors. To be sure, he was master of his trade; but when he hired one of their number to go down to Sacramento, and bring back all he needed in connection with it, they shrewdly suspected that he was in hiding. But what cared they?

Few men among the Californian camps would be willing to have everything in their past lives known to the world. Jem did send a letter to the city to give Leviticus a hint of his whereabouts, but as that worthy was in jail in San Francisco, on a year's sentence, it failed to reach him. But as life was moving on smoothly with our old acquaintance at Sugar Loaf Camp, he did not worry himself greatly over the Jew's unaccountable silence. The trade was a profitable one in his new location ; there were no troublesome rival attractions to diminish his profits, and altogether he was beginning to feel very much at home.

Meanwhile, keen-eyed detectives were at work. Mr. Stanton had lost no time in setting the machinery of the detective bureau in operation, and under the potency of promised rewards, they had found the scent, and were slowly working their way upon the track of their prey. Quietly, and unknown to the dwellers in that mountain region, every trail had been investigated, and the roll call of every camp inspected. From the Flat the trail was finally struck, and from camp to camp, up the ascending paths, his course was traced. Every resting place in his journey was noted. Step by step, like a relentless fate, was discovery approaching his hiding place. It came upon him like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky. He had never felt safer nor more secure than on the golden summer day when an officer of the law

stepped into his saloon, saying, as he tapped him upon the shoulder:

“James Flanigan, you are my prisoner!”

It was of no use to resist. There could be no appeal to his ready revolver, with another threatening him. The men were all at the diggings, and they cared too little for him to resist the law on his behalf had they been there.

No time was given him to arrange his business. Outside the door appeared another man, and the hapless prisoner was marched away, being allowed to take only his gold dust with him. Down the mountain they went, in stern silence, camping out at meal-times and at night until they reached the Flat. From here they went by stage till they reached Sacramento, and the guilty man was safely lodged in jail under guard of iron bars.

There had not been time for an answer to arrive from the East in answer to Mr. Stanton's letter. But he rubbed his hands together in great satisfaction, for, with the papers in his possession, he could the better act in the case. A messenger was at once sent to Fortune Gulch to summon Richard Trent and Bessie.

Bob Burns was still in the place, and taking him along as a witness, Richard and Bessie hastened to Sacramento. The child was neatly and tastefully dressed in the clothing Richard had taken her from the city upon

his former visit, and a sweeter, lovelier little maiden it would be hard to find.

In due time the trial came on. Jem Flanigan had chosen John Means as his lawyer. Jem stubbornly denied all knowledge of the box. The testimony of Richard Trent and Bob Burns showed only circumstantial evidence, and as Jem would give no reason for his sudden flight from Fortune Gulch, the matter was sadly muddled. The jury and audience were thoroughly convinced of his guilt, but absolute proof was wanting to convict him.

So he was acquitted. Wily John Means thought he saw his opportunity, and sent a message to Mr. Stanton, saying that the box might be found if it was made enough of an object to those in possession. The lawyer consulted Richard Trent.

"Why, yes; I'd be willin' ter giv' considerbul to git hold ov them papers; only I hate ter hev them raskils git off scott free, an' with a reward in the bargain."

"I am afraid it is the best we can do," replied Mr. Stanton. So negotiations were opened, which resulted in the delivery of the box that very day.

Richard Trent produced the key and opened it. The papers lay there as of old, but where was the bag of gold? Richard asked this question excitedly.

"What bag of gold?" exclaimed Mr. Stanton. When he had learned the facts, he sprang up, saying: "We

must issue a warrant for the arrest of John Means at once for theft ! We'll have them yet."

So, to his utter astonishment, Slippery Jack soon found himself a prisoner in turn. He had known nothing of the bag of gold in the box when it was stolen, else he had been more wary.

To clear himself at the trial, it was necessary for him to tell the whole story of receiving it from Jem Flanigan, by the hand of Leviticus. So Jem was once more a prisoner ; charged anew with the crime of which he had been acquitted. The result was that he was sentenced to a long term in the penitentiary ; while John Means was sent to keep him company for a time for complicity in receiving stolen goods.

It seemed very strange, that after so long a time justice had been meted out to these rank offenders ; and that John Means had been caught in a trap of his own devising. He had long been suspected of being an aider and abettor of the lawless men who were subverting the good order and safety of the State. People breathed more freely, and great was the rejoicing over his downfall.

Mrs. Stanton had taken Bessie into her own motherly charge. Her whole heart went out to the child with such a strange history, yet unspoiled by her sojourn in the mining camp. The story of Richard Trent and his ward was soon spread abroad, exciting much interest. He found himself quite a lion, a notoriety very displeas-

ing to his humble, simple nature. He could not see anything remarkable in what he had done. No one with a spark of manhood about him could have helped caring for the poor little orphan, left alone in such a sad and pitiful fashion. The debt was on his side, as he thought. She had done far more for him than he ever had done for her.

Mrs. Stanton was fast becoming so attached to Bessie that I do not think she would have mourned greatly if no tidings of distant friends had ever come to take the child away. For the gift of children of their own had been denied to the Stantons, and this left a void in Mrs. Stanton's generous heart that never had been filled. She really coveted Bessie, and often said to her husband, before the finding of the box, with the important tidings it contained, that if Bessie remained unclaimed, they must adopt her as a daughter of the house. Perhaps she did not sufficiently take into consideration Richard's claim to the little waif.

CHAPTER XIV.

REVELATIONS.

IT was with no little trepidation that Richard Trent entered Mr. Stanton's library on the evening of the day in which they had recovered the box. The papers, over which there had been an endless amount of anxiety and trouble, were at last to be made to tell their story. They had been the cause of crime, and well-nigh bloodshed. A little care might have prevented it all; but as the camp did not suspect a traitor among its inhabitants, no one could be blamed for lack of precautions against treachery. Richard felt the time drawing near when he must give Bessie up to her rightful guardians. He thanked the Lord every day that she had been lent to be such a blessing to him and to others, and for her sake he was glad that better things were probably in store for her than it was in his power to give; yet his heart was very heavy in view of his own future loneliness.

Mr. Stanton was awaiting his coming. The papers were arranged carefully upon the desk, and a letter lay beside them.

"This matter is proving interesting," he said, with a

smile of welcome. "Your little girl has bright prospects before her."

Richard sat down in silence, waiting for the revelations he had longed for, yet dreaded to know.

"This," said Mr. Stanton, taking up one of the papers and unfolding it, "is a certificate of marriage between David Preston and Elizabeth Chandler, dated seven years ago, in Oldport, Maine. These letters tell the story of a misunderstanding between David Preston and his parents on account of this marriage. It seems they were opposed to the match on purely money grounds, and in a fit of hot-headed rage he left the East and came to California. His father was the one who made the trouble, his mother standing his friend all through, yet not daring to oppose her husband openly. His only crime had been that he had married a portionless girl. He made a vow never to return East until he could go back rich and independent of his father. I tell you, those letters from his mother, begging him to reconsider his rash promise, would touch a heart of stone."

The old-fashioned daguerreotype Richard had seen before. He leaned eagerly forward to look at it, as Mr. Stanton said:

"This is the picture of Bessie's mother. Here is a paper inserted in the case, on which is written: 'My wife Elizabeth. A sweeter woman ne'er drew breath. For Bessie, her namesake.' "

Richard Trent studied the lovely face long and intently. It was like an angel vision. Did his Bessie have such a mother? His own claim to the child grew dim and shadowy.

"I gather from the letters," Mr. Stanton continued, "that he was never successful in California. He tried various things, bought a little home down in the foothills, and made a brave struggle, until his wife died three years ago. This was a crushing blow and unsettled him. I suspect that it crazed his brain a little. He thought he could not go home empty-handed, for his father had never sent him a word of forgiveness."

"Did thet ole man think the Lord cud forgive him?" asked Richard, with startling suddenness.

"I don't suppose he thought of that side of the matter. Anyhow, it did not influence him to show mercy to his son."

"Did you find out all thet from them letters?" asked Richard, admiringly.

"Yes, from his mother's letters to him. They were evidently in reply to his letters to her. They are so full of loving sympathy that it is easy to read the other side of the story."

"Preston left his home," he continued, "not selling it, for the deed is among the papers; and taking his little girl came up into the mountains to dig for gold. There are no letters from his mother dated later than three years

ago, because, after writing her that he was going to seek his fortune in the gold regions, he evidently drifted from place to place, buoyed up by the hope that any day he might find rich treasures that would enable him to fly homeward."

"I understand," said Richard. "He never struck it rich, but woz allers a hopin' to."

"The rest," said Mr. Stanton, "I gather from this letter which I received to-day, in answer to mine sent at your request. Shall I read it?"

Richard Trent nodded. The story was inexpressibly sad, and he saw again in memory the vision of a pale, haggard man, desperately searching for hidden treasures that never revealed themselves to his gaze, although they lay close by where he toiled day after day. And this was the letter:

"DEAR SIR: The description given in your letter, just received, seems to point unmistakably to our son, David Preston, and his child. Bessie, as you say her father called her, is undoubtedly a contraction of Elizabeth. We had not heard from our son for three years, at which time he wrote that he was going into the mining regions, taking the little girl with him.

"My husband and I deeply regret the loss of the papers, as they would supply the needed proofs of identity. You say that the man who has cared for the child has set on foot a search for the miscreant who stole them. We will wait for further advices from you in the matter. If it appears that she is really our lost grandchild, a liberal reward awaits all done in her behalf.

"My husband's right arm is paralyzed, therefore I write in

his name. I beg you to hasten all proceedings, for our hearts are sore with long suspense.

“Yours very sincerely,

“HARRIET PRESTON.”

“I shouldn’t think they cud wait!” exclaimed Richard Trent. “Why, ef I’d waited three years fur news from somebody I loved, d’ ye s’pose I’d stop fur better proofs than ye sent ’em?” He was getting excited.

“It is evidently the old man, Richard. His heart melted sufficiently to seek tidings of his only son as he grew helpless in his old age. There is no doubt that there is property in the case, as is shown by this will.” As he spoke, he took up a legal-looking document.

“Is that ere a will?” asked Richard, curiously.

“Yes; a will dated three years ago, and a rather unusual one too; for it bequeaths to ‘Elizabeth, my daughter, all my earthly possessions, wherever and whenever found.’ That looks as if he was a little uncertain about the value or amount of those possessions.”

“What are the rest ov them papers?” inquired Richard Trent.

“This one,” said the lawyer, taking a single sheet of paper from the table, “directs that in case of his death, notice should be forwarded to Charles Preston, Esq., of River Plains, Connecticut, who would send for the child. As Charles Preston, of River Plains, was the name signed

to the advertisement, it furnishes the absolute proof they ask."

"Ef we cud only hev had them papers in the start!" groaned Richard. "It would hev saved a powerful sight o' trouble. But it's a 'comin' out all right now."

A sealed envelope, with bulky contents, was lying beside the other papers. "This," remarked Mr. Stanton, "has written upon its face, 'For my dear daughter Bessie. Not to be opened until her eighteenth birthday.'"

"An' jest to think how near she kum to losin' it!" exclaimed Richard. "But how's she ter know when her birthday cums?"

"The record of it is here," said Mr. Stanton, "on the back of the marriage certificate. 'Born, January 15, 18—, to David and Elizabeth Preston, a son, Charles David. Died, March 13, 18—.'"

"Shoo!" said Richard, pityingly. "Ef it hed a' lived, Bessie would hev had a brother."

"'Born, July 15, 18—, a daughter, Elizabeth Harriet.'"

"Two years younger than the boy, wozn't she?" remarked Richard. "Well, the little feller woz saved a heap o' hard times, sure."

Mr. Stanton gathered up the papers, and began putting them back carefully and in order in the box. But he seemed preoccupied, and presently he said:

"I haven't told you quite all yet, Richard."

"What's the rest ov it," asked the other. "I've heerd enough now to keep my eyes open all night."

"Two years ago, an advertisement appeared in the papers, inquiring for David Preston, or his heirs. His little property in the foothills had turned out to have a silver mine upon it, and parties were anxious to find the owner of the land. I have a habit of keeping a file of every such thing, and often I find it of use to me. I sent down an inquiry after you were here, and have found out that it is very valuable indeed. So little Bessie will not go back empty-handed to her family, after all."

"Ef poor Preston cud only hev knowed it!" ejaculated Richard, "he might hev bin livin' in comfort and happiness ter day. But the Lord must hev done what woz best."

"We can't bring him back to life again, that's certain," said the lawyer. "All we can do is to secure to Bessie what rightfully belongs to her. I will write to her grandparents to-morrow, forwarding the letters and the sheet of directions David Preston left behind him, as the positive proof they ask for. The handwriting of the letter I received to-day, is the same as that of those in the box. I presume they will send for the child as soon as the word reaches them."

"Well, while we're waitin', I guess I'll take Bessie up to Fortune Gulch. It's hum up thar ter the child, and Janet Rose loves her like her own. She must take a

good-bye look at her father's grave, fur it's noways likely she'll ever see it agin."

So saying, Richard Trent bade the lawyer good-night, and went to his hotel, with so much to think over that his prophecy of a sleepless night was fulfilled. The long mystery was unravelled, and Bessie had a home and friends awaiting her in far-distant New England. One thing worried him greatly. It was getting late in the season, and he feared she would be forced to spend another winter in California, unless they sent for her speedily. To be sure, there was the route by sea, but he could not bear to think of her as undergoing its perils and discomforts. It seemed to Richard that she must be bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, so mightily did his soul cry out for her. Of his future life, solitary and alone, he dared not think. It seemed as if it would madden him.

Then came quieter thoughts. She had been lent him for a little season, to be the blessing and saving influence of his existence. Pure and sweet as she was, unsullied by the rude and vile elements in the mines, could he wish to keep her from the training and loving watchcare which would fit her to be such a woman as her mother had been? How vividly the lovely face he had seen in the picture rose before him. Bessie resembled her even now, and what would she not be with all the advantages of education and culture that wealth could bestow.

It was all right. He did not deserve anything more than had already been given him; even that was a free gift of a loving Heavenly Father to a reckless sinner against his grace. For the future, his life should be given to helping the needy and perishing for Christ's sake, and for Bessie's sake, as well.

Looking up, strengthened and cheered by this resolution, the dawn was reddening in the east, and a new day was at hand.

Bessie and Richard were very glad to get back to Fortune Gulch once more. The few remaining men who had known of her story, rejoiced heartily in her good fortune. Janet Rose pressed her tenderly to her heart, in loving welcome.

"Ah, my lamb," she said, "the dear Lord is indeed merciful! May he keep thee unspotted from the evil that is in the world!"

In due process of time, before he expected it, a letter came from Mr. Stanton, summoning them to Sacramento. All knew that this was Bessie's final farewell. Pete went with them, and everything that David Preston had left behind, that would be of value as mementos, was taken. The box of books, a few personal articles, were all they could carry the sorrowing mother, save the living, loving child. Quite a crowd gathered as the Monte Christo stage, which was to take them down the mountains, drew up at the door. John and Janet Rose

gave Bessie the parting kiss, solemn and tender, "Rosebud" was held up for a good-bye hug, and amid a chorus of good-wishes and farewells, "Queen Bess," as they still loved to call her, disappeared from Fortune Gulch. She was not old enough to realize the importance of the occasion, nor that she had reached another crisis in her life. All through the journey, Richard Trent was tenderly devoted to her comfort. He could not say much, for the shadow of parting lay heavy on his heart. The hours passed as in a dream. Bessie was happily diverted by passing scenes, and thus she journeyed on toward the new scenes and experiences waiting for the coming of her feet.



Fortune Gulch.

CHAPTER XV.

TOWARD THE SUNRISING.

WHEN Richard Trent reached Sacramento with his charge, he was met with surprising intelligence. Charles Preston had forwarded ample funds, providing not only for the expenses of her journey, but also for the rewarding of those who had befriended Bessie in her loneliness and need. As they themselves were old and feeble, Mr. Preston requested that Richard Trent, who had been such a tender and faithful guardian to the child, should himself bring her to her home and friends.

"I have sent him no reward," the letter ran, "because money alone can never express our obligation, and we desire to thank him in person. We could not confide her to any care in the long journey with such absolute trust."

It will be seen by this that Mr. Stanton had told to the distant relatives of Bessie the whole story of Richard's devotion to the child, as far as any such story can be told on paper. He wished to show the stern old grandfather that there was such a thing in this world as absolutely unselfish service. The idea of going East was new and almost overwhelming to Richard Trent. He had come to Sacramento fully expecting to meet a messenger sent to

take Bessie to her grandparents, although he had been puzzled to understand how one could arrive so soon after Mr. Stanton's second communication. The thought that there was no parting hour at hand, but that he might go with her to her journey's end, and with his own eyes see her safe in loving guardianship, was almost too much for his self-control.

"I don't want no reward," he said, brokenly. "Bessie hes bin a greater blessin' ter me than all I've done fur her. Its reward 'nuff thet I kin go with her."

At Richard's suggestion, the money not needed for the expenses of the long journey was sent to John Rose, a portion of it to be given to Bob Burns, the only one of the original members of the camp remaining.

"It'll help worthy folks," Richard said. Janet Rose did more for the child than any of us. They deserve every cent."

It was already so late in the season that Richard felt considerable apprehension in regard to the long journey across the plains. Inquiry showed that a large wagon train was about starting from Sacramento, and Richard made arrangements to join it. He prepared his outfit with great care. A large wagon, with heavy canvas cover, was fitted up with a comfortable bed for Bessie, and as many conveniences as could be stowed away in a small space. An ample supply of provisions was laid in, and every emergency provided for that human foresight could

anticipate. A team of strong horses was purchased, with one extra for use in case of need. As the wagons were to bring back goods, there was plenty of room in the train to carry feed for the animals. Another favorable circumstance for our travelers was the fact that the train not being heavily loaded on this, its outward journey, could push rapidly forward, making excellent time on the way. Richard had learned to recognize the hand of Providence in all things, and he gratefully thanked God for these favorable conditions. Strong animals, and plenty of them, abundance of provision and feed, assured a quick trip in case of favorable weather.

It was early in August when the wagon train left Sacramento. The teamsters were experienced hands in crossing the plains, and knew how to take every advantage of the way. The weather was perfect, and they were enabled to travel at great speed.

Bessie seemed to enjoy the whole trip. There was one woman in the party, the wife of a miner who was returning to the States. She was a kind-hearted body, and was company for the child when they paused to cook their meals at cheerful camp fires, and on the Sundays.

The head manager of the train was a unique character. He could swear like a pirate when angered, and deal a stunning blow on occasion; but he was brave, kind-hearted, and firm in his refusal to travel on Sunday.

"No, mates," he would say, "I've traveled these ere

plains ten times, all told, and the parties that rested themselves and the beasts allus came through fust, and in better shape. The Lord knew what he was about when he writ the fourth commandment."

So, on the Sunday the long train bivouacked in the wilderness. The weary beasts had the luxury of resting out of harness for twenty-four hours, and the human beings also were reminded of their obligation to keep the entire decalogue, the careful observance of one commandment reminding them that there were nine others equally binding.

Once only was there exception made to this rule. Crossing the dreaded sage-brush region, where water was scarce, and the streams far apart, they were compelled to push on in mercy to their beasts, which were in danger of becoming alkalized, in which case they must be left behind to perish. So through this region of death they hurried, feeling sure that the exigencies of the situation made the act no violation of the spirit of the commandment.

They succeeded in passing it with less loss and suffering than is usual, three horses only being sacrificed, one of these being the extra animal belonging to Richard's outfit.

The story of the long, weary way from the shore of the Pacific to the boundaries of Eastern civilization has been told many times, over and over. Therefore, we will not

describe the trip of our travelers in detail. Suffice it to say that, thanks to the kind Providence who watches over his children, the journey was one of remarkable comfort and pleasure. The hindrances and difficulties of the way were passed with unusual ease, while the unpleasant experiences were reduced to a minimum. Michael Brown, the captain of the train, declared it was the easiest and quickest trip he ever had made.

"And I believe," he said, "that it was all on account of that little girl. A blessin' seemed to foller us all the way."

"It was the old camp experience over again. Bessie did, indeed, seem to carry prosperity and success wherever she went, since the time when her lonely, orphaned condition left her at the mercy of kindly hearts.

It was the middle of October when they reached Council Bluffs, the terminus of the wagon route. Goods were shipped up the Missouri River from St. Louis to this point, where they were loaded into wagons and taken by the overland route for the California trade. The train with which our friends had come proposed to winter at Council Bluffs, and be ready to return when spring opened.

It was with real regret that Richard Trent bade good-bye to his traveling companions, after having disposed of his outfit, for it was the last link with his old life in California. But all things having been accomplished, he

and Bessie were soon *en route* for New England. This part of the journey was really more wearisome than the traveling by wagon. Richard and Bessie attracted much attention on the cars. The elderly, respectably dressed man, with his rugged face, which expressed the innate goodness of his heart, belonged evidently to a different class of society from that of the dainty little maiden in his care. Mrs. Stanton had attended to the matter of the child's dress, so that she might go to her grandparents suitably attired. Many were the inquiries elicited, to all of which Richard gave answer with the utmost good-nature. So it came about that all the through passengers became acquainted with the strange story of the little one, and it excited great interest.

The journey by rail occupied two days and a night. Bessie was very tired before it ended. The continual rattle and rush were distressing to the pair who had been accustomed to the solitude and quiet of the mountains.

It came to an end at last, and Richard felt a desperate failure of his courage. He dreaded to meet those fine friends of Bessie, realizing keenly the fact that he was only a rough, California miner. Mr. Stanton had written advising the Prestons of the departure of the travelers in the wagon train across the plains, but as they had no means of knowing definitely the date of their arrival, there was no one at the station to meet them. The journey had been performed with such unusual speed that

they were at their destination before any one had begun to look for them. Therefore, Richard was obliged to inquire his way to Charles Preston's house.

It was one of the most imposing residences in the town, and was not hard to find. As he approached it, its air of massive grandeur caused his heart to misgive him more than ever. But he said, resolutely, to himself:

"Richard Trent, be a man! Yer duty leads ye inter that house, an' when you've given Bessie inter the hands ov them thet hez a right to her, then ye kin leave an' find yer own level amongst folks."

A solemn, dignified servant answered his ring. Richard said, simply:

"Tell Mrs. Preston thet little Bessie is here."

A look of surprise came into the man's impassive face, and he escorted Richard Trent, with Bessie in his arms, across a wide hall into a cozy, well-lighted room, where were seated a stern-looking old man, and a sweet, tender-faced old lady, whose snow-white hair fell in silvery waves over her forehead. As our friend Richard entered with the child, she started up, pressing her hands tightly over her heart. He walked straight up to her, saying:

"This is little Bessie, ma'am, from Californy."

Sitting down, she stretched out her hands in unspeakable longing. Richard placed the child on her lap, where she was clasped to her grandmother's breast, while a rain of hot tears and kisses were showered upon her.

Bewildered and frightened, Bessie turned to her old friend.

"Thet's yer own grandma, Bessie," he said, soothingly. "Ye've got home now."

But the child would not rest till she was back in the arms that had been her refuge through the most of her brief remembrance. Old Mr. Preston had risen, and was standing beside her. His tall form was trembling, and as the lines of his stern countenance softened, the resemblance to a worn, haggard face they had laid out of sight in Fortune Gulch almost startled Richard.

"Is this my son's child, Elizabeth?" he asked, solemnly.

With a feeling, as if he were demanding of him a sacred trust, Richard answered, gravely:

"It is the child David Preston died an' left in the Californy mountains."

The palsied right arm refused to do its owner's bidding. He could not take the little one, as he manifestly longed to do, but he pressed a kiss upon her brow, a kiss of full recognition of the wee maiden as a daughter of the house. Then he turned to Richard, and grasped his hand with his own left hand.

"Are you the Richard Trent that the lawyer mentioned as having been the child's guardian since her father left her?"

Bowing his head in the humility that he most sincerely felt, Richard answered:

"Richard Trent is my name. I dun the best I cud fur the little one; but life is rough-like in the mines, an' thar woz nary woman fur months. My pards tuk to her, an' we tried ter do all we cud; but seein' we woz hard an' wicked, it warn't no place fur her. It woz winter, ye see, an' she jest hed ter stay. But she done us all good, sir, an' afore she left the camp, we hed learned ter love the Lord Jesus Christ. She's bin the biggest blessin' ov my life, sir, but I'm mighty glad ter put her in the arms ov them thet kin do fur her what ought ter be done."

Richard's voice broke in spite of himself. He was sitting now, for Bessie, tired out, had fallen asleep in his arms. Mrs. Preston arose, and grasped his free hand, with the tears running down her face.

"Richard Trent," she said, with intense earnestness, "may God do so to us and more also if we ever forget what you have done for our precious child. The hands that helped lay our son David in a quiet grave, and the heart that was tender for the orphaned baby, deserves more than we can ever give."

"Yes," added Mr. Preston, in a broken voice, "our home shall be yours as long as you choose to make it so. We are your debtors for life, in a sense that money can never repay."

Richard was overwhelmed by so much gratitude. He could not understand it. But the mastering feeling was that God was good. He need not leave Bessie, for they

had bidden him stay beside her. Yet his sturdy, native independence revolted against receiving so much without service on his part.

As soon as he could regain his self-control, he said :

"I thank you, friends. Ef ye hev sumthin' fur me to do, I'd gladly stay near Bessie. The child hez got hold of a bit of my heart. I've got plenty ter live on ; it isn't the need of enythin' like thet, but I hunger ter be near the baby. Ez I told ye, she's bin the blessin' ov my life. I've bin knocked around ever sence I kin remember, with nobody to keer fur me, but she loved me, the fust in all the wide world. Ef ye hezn't enythin' fur me ter do, I'll hunt fur work close by."

But Mr. Preston laid a detaining hand on Richard's shoulder.

"You belong to us," he said. "Remember, it is all strange to the child, and she will need your familiar face till she becomes used to her new surroundings."

"I will stay," he answered. Then, turning to Mrs. Preston, he continued :

"I hope ye will not think it a liberty, ma'am, but cud Bessie sleep in my room to-night? She's thet tired thet she'd be sadly frightened to wake up an' not see Uncle Dick beside her. I've larnt her to call me Uncle Dick, ma'am," he added, apologetically. "She needed some one ter belong with."

"And Uncle Dick it shall still be," Mrs. Preston said,

kindly. "A cot shall be placed in your room for her to-night, and to-morrow we can make farther arrangements."

So Richard Trent had his darling all to himself for one more night. Do you wonder that he fell asleep thanking God for all his goodness? He need not be parted from her in the glad future stretching out before them. He could have the joy of watching her beautiful development in this sheltering home to which he had been permitted to bring her. Surely, the best service of the remainder of his life was due to this blessed Lord and Master.

CHAPTER XVI.

BESSIE AT HOME.

MATTERS were soon satisfactorily arranged. Mr. Preston, feeble and partially helpless, needed a trustworthy man to superintend the place, and supply, in a physical sense, the useless right hand.

Had Richard Trent been an educated man, he would have been made Mr. Preston's private secretary; but his faithfulness made him valuable in the capacity of general manager.

Pete, brought from the station with the baggage, was also made welcome as a member of the family. In his air of perfect contentment, he gave no sign of longing for his old life in the Sierras. He accepted the new conditions of existence, always happy if he could be near his little mistress. In course of time, he grew so large that he could not be allowed to live in the house; but a luxurious kennel was built, where he held royal court for all the dogs of the neighborhood. He always went with Bessie in her walks, and was a real protector.

And what of Bessie's new life? It was far different from anything in her experience. She soon became wonted to her grandparents and the nurse. Till then,

she clung to Richard; and his unvarying tenderness awakened wonder and admiration in the hearts of the child's doting friends.

A lovely room, dainty and exquisite in all its appointments, was fitted up for the little maiden. Her nurse was a woman who had been known and trusted by Mrs. Preston for many years. Yet everything that pertained to her welfare and comfort was continually under the watchful eye of her grandmother. In short, she took her rightful place as the child of a wealthy home. Clad in dainty garments, she flitted to and fro, the very embodiment of brightness and joy. Before her coming, the old house had been a gloomy and silent abode, haunted with the ghosts of departed years. Now all was changed. Her grandfather seemed to grow younger and less stern every day. In fact, there was danger that he would spoil her, for he could never bear to have her wishes crossed in the slightest degree. Her grandmother was more wise; but after all, it was Uncle Dick whose influence helped to preserve the right balance in Bessie's affairs. As he went in and out, attending to his many duties he always seemed to know how to speak the words that restrained her in any childish naughtiness. His standing was not at all that of a servant, but a beloved member of the family. All realized that in him Bessie had a true and faithful friend; one who would be, if occasion offered, faithful even unto death.

Through the services of Mr. Stanton, David Preston's property in California, with its rich silver mine, was sold, and a handsome fortune reinvested in Eastern securities in Elizabeth Preston's name. Before the winter snows blockaded the cañon, a marble shaft gleamed white over the grave in Fortune Gulch. Charles Preston also persuaded Richard Trent to invest his property in certain tried and proved directions, not knowing that this faithful Christian had mentally devoted every dollar not needed for his own support to the advancement of the Lord's kingdom.

"I meant it all fur Bessie," he said to himself; "but Bessie has more than she needs of her own. Thar is plenty of need fur money ter carry on the good work. I'll jest keep my eyes open, an' see whar it 'll do the most good."

The old people never tired of hearing Richard tell the particulars of David Preston's coming into Fortune Gulch camp, and his life while there. The books which he had packed away as the last act of his life, in the happy belief that he was going home, were treasured as sacred relics. His mother could not express her grateful thanks to the men who had generously contributed their gold to send the poor, sick wanderer home.

"Oh," she would exclaim in her grief, "why couldn't his life have been spared just a little longer, so that he might have died at home!"

"It 'pears to me, ma'am," Richard answered, on one of these occasions, "thet the dear Lord let him die ter save souls on the mountains. Why, ef ye cud know the wickedness of the men in them mining camps, rough an' bad more 'cause they hasn't good influences than 'cause they wants ter be bad, ye would be glad that David Preston, by givin' up his life, left Bessie ter do her blessed work. She made us human agin; little by little the devil lost hold, an' we got a grip on God. Then he sent a sarvent of his own ter us, an' we found out that the Lord woz a lovin' ov us all the time, an' sendin' these yer happenin's ter draw us whar we ought ter be. I tell ye, ma'am, it woz worth one man's life, the good done in that one camp."

Gradually she grew to take in the blessed truth, and to rejoice that he died happy, in the expectation of seeing her again.

David had been the only child; and portraits of him at various periods in his life were all about the house. These greatly interested Richard. He would stand and study them by the hour. Then shaking his head, he would say:

"They don't look like the man thet cum inter Fortune Gulch. Sickness, an' sorrer, an' worriment ov mind made him jest a shadder of these ere picters. I reckon it's all right now. Wonder ef I'll know him in heaven?"

The greatest evidence of the change of mind in Charles Preston was the fact that a life-size portrait of Bessie's

mother, painted from the little daguerreotype found in the box, in process of time hung in the drawing room. Bessie was strikingly like her. "She is clear Chandler," Richard heard her grandfather say one day, a little regretfully. Then he smiled at the spirited answer of the child's devoted grandmother:

"That doesn't spoil her a bit. She is sweet and pretty and good enough to do honor to the Preston name, and I am glad David named her Elizabeth. It just suits her little queenly ways."

Richard longed to find Bill Myers. He remembered the name of the New York town where his family had lived during the years of his sojourn in the land of gold, but, alas, he could not write. How he longed to tell him of the wonderful way in which the Lord had led Bessie and himself, and the solution of the mystery over which he and Bill had puzzled so many weary hours! His heart longed after the man who had been his partner through weary stretches of gold digging. Comrade and friend, he had entered with him, a brother beloved, into the kingdom of heaven. How had it fared with him since the day he had turned his face eastward after his long exile?

Their common faith in Christ Jesus had been a closer bond of union than anything that had gone before. In this wide Eastern land was there to be no token, no sign between them?

Unconsciously, Richard let fall a hint of this longing

in one of his talks with Mrs. Preston. It seemed as if she could not find enough ways in which she could be of service to this man who had rendered such royal ministry to the dead and to the living. Immediately she offered to write to this town for him, in the hope that it might reach his old friend. It had not occurred to Richard to ask her to do this favor, so unaccustomed was he to any service from others. But he gratefully accepted the offer, and the letter was sent on its way, reaching Bill Myers safely in due time.

A week later, a letter came in return, badly spelled and written, but joyfully welcomed by Richard. Mrs. Preston had no small task to decipher all of it, but at last she succeeded, and was able to read it to him. And this was the letter, save for corrections in spelling:

MY DEAR PARD: I take my pen in hand to say that I am well, and hoping you are the same. I got your letter, old pard, and I was mighty glad to hear from you. And so you did find them papers! I knew that ere Jem took them. And Bessie had a silver mile, and her pappy didn't know it. Well, things is strange. Was glad to hear that Bessie got home, and you stay with her folks. I got home all right, and the children have grown just powerful. I bought me a nice farm when my debts was paid, and my place is very pleasant. I joined the church after I come, and the Lord and me we sticks together. Come and see me, old pard. Wife wants to know you. Let me hear again. No more at present.

From your old pard,

WILLIAM MYERS.

P. S. I can't think of you noways but as Absalom. Don't know Richard Trent."

Richard treasured this letter as worth its weight in gold. His life had known few objects of affection, and in their long and close association, Bill Myers had become dear to his heart.

"You must make Bill a visit," said Mrs. Preston, one day, when he had been talking about his old chum in a way that showed a hungering to see him once more.

"Kin Mr. Preston spare me?" he asked, a little wistfully.

"Spare you? Of course I can," said that gentleman, when the question was referred to him. "You have put matters in such good trim that they will almost run themselves, I think. The question is, can you tear yourself away from Bessie?" he continued, laughing.

"Seein' that I know she is in safe care, I kin, I guess," answered Richard. So it was settled that he should take as long a vacation as he felt like doing. It was quite a journey, but they studied out the route well for him beforehand, so that he need have no difficulty in making the necessary changes. Mrs. Preston wrote to notify Bill Myers of his coming, and he started on his way full of anticipation.

Bill was waiting for him when he stepped from the cars at the end of his journey. What a visit the two men had! After seeing Richard's changed appearance, Bill had little trouble to substitute the new name. In regard to the matter, he said:

"You're right, ole pard. Absalom don't fit you no-ways now. Ye look like another man, yet I kin see yer ole self too, when ye speak."

Bill Myers had changed also. He was a man of importance and influence in his neighborhood, and Richard greatly enjoyed going over his fine farm. Choice stock roamed in the pastures, while his horses were the pride of their owner's heart. His residence was large and comfortable, and on every hand were evidences of thrift and plenty. Mrs. Myers was a pleasant woman, who welcomed her husband's old friend most cordially. Now her life was full of comfort and happiness, but past trouble had worn deep furrows in her face. The present peace and joy must seem in vivid contrast to such a past.

Bill had reason to be proud of his children. Five of them sat around his table. Willie, the oldest, his father's namesake, was almost of age, and the right-hand helper in farm work. Last of all was Jack, the baby, born after Bill's return from his long exile, and named for John Rose. Between were three blooming girls.

In the church, William Myers was a power. He was leader of the choir, and one of the best financial supporters of the gospel. Better than all, he was a consistent, active, Christian. He lived his religion every day in the week. He could talk to men who spurned religious counsel from all others.

The two friends spent many hours comparing experiences since their parting at Fortune Gulch. Bill had no end of questions to ask regarding the solution of the perplexing mystery that overhung Bessie's affairs when he last saw her.

"It is jest wonderful, Dick," said he, "how that child was taken keer of and kept through all thet time. An' so Jem is in prison! I am glad ter know that he got his deserts at last."

Richard went back to River Plains cheered and comforted by this visit. Bill promised to return it at some time when there was a lull in farm work. He had a longing to see Bessie, the baby of the old mining camp, in her changed surroundings. The child welcomed "Uncle Dick" gleefully, and all were truly glad to have him back, for the wheels of affairs did not run so smoothly when he was not in charge. He also was contented to step into the old groove once more. His heart was satisfied; and faithful in the least, as well as in the greater duties of his office, the days slipped by in perfect peace and satisfaction.

He had become a member of the church the Prestons attended. He was not prominent like Bill Myers, but he exemplified in an eminent manner the grace of giving. The pastor soon learned where to go for means with which to prosecute special lines of Christian work.

"The money isn't mine," Richard would say, "it is

the Lord's. Ef he'll jest show me whar he wants it, thar it shall go."

And thus the years sped by. Bessie in her beautiful home rapidly grew into a lovely girl. Peacefully her grandparents passed toward the sunset, and our friend Richard was finding the late joy and sweetness of living.

CHAPTER XVII.

BESSIE AT EIGHTEEN.

FOURTEEN years have passed since we last saw Bessie, the idol of her grandparents' home. Through trials and perils sore for a tender child, she had been safely led to a haven of rest and peace.

The years that lay between that childhood time and the present fruition were, for the most part, uneventful years. Tutors and masters taught her at home through all the foundation period of her education. Her doting grandparents could not bear to send her from them, after their narrow escape from losing her altogether.

As she developed with the passing years, Bessie proved to be all their hearts could wish. She inherited her mother's rare beauty, with the spirit and grace of the Preston's. Among her young associates, as in the camp at Fortune Gulch, she was always "Queen Bess." Music was her absorbing passion. Her voice proved to be one of marvellous scope and power, with all the sweetness of the wild bird's song. She received training from the best masters; and the more solid branches of education were by no means neglected. Bright, and quick to learn, Bessie progressed rapidly. Her physical development





Fortune Gulch.

was carefully watched over. It was a pretty sight to see her on her pony, Fleet, in her dainty habit, skimming over the country like the wind, Pete always close behind.

A less generous, unselfish nature might have been spoiled by all this lavish petting and indulgence. But there must have been a gift by inheritance which proved her safeguard. It seemed utterly impossible to spoil Bessie. Her soul was too full of delicate, sympathetic impulses, to appropriate so much without giving lavishly in return. She had the power to anticipate the slightest wishes of her grandparents, and her life was only joyous in giving joy to others. Her glorious voice filled the old house with music. Had she been a poor girl, her gift of song would have been her fortune. As it was, she used it in imparting pleasure.

Charles Preston grew more and more helpless as time passed on; but his sight and hearing were mercifully spared to him. He would watch Bessie as she flitted about with an expression of intense love and longing, and when she sang, he would listen with an air of perfect contentment.

Grandmother Preston faded away slowly. For a time, she seemed to renew her age in Bessie's bright presence; and the care of the child was a perpetual joy that was like an elixir of life. But, as her charge grew beyond the need of so much personal oversight, she rested peacefully while watching her beautiful development. Un-

consciously, the silver cord was being gently loosened, and the golden bowl drawing nearer to its breaking.

Bessie was passionately devoted to her grandmother. She loved the old man with ardent affection, but the tie between the child and Mrs. Preston was peculiarly tender. It was her delight to give to them daily ministrations of comfort, and surely their last days were sweetened and brightened by her loving presence.

Bessie was fifteen when the first bereavement came. A final shock of his old enemy, paralysis, ended the life-story for Charles Preston. His later years were very different from the stern, hard years that preceded them. After his palsied tongue became unable to express his thoughts, all the repentance for former injustice and hardness toward his own, was locked within his breast. But a change was evident. Bessie had brought to him also, the divine lesson.

One morning, they found him cold and lifeless. The last shock had laid its paralyzing touch upon his heart, and stilled its pulsations forever. The physician had warned them of this probable ending, but it was almost as crushing and terrible as if they had not shudderingly watched for its coming.

A grand funeral pageant followed, and Charles Preston was laid in his grave with manifold honors. He had been a man of importance and influence, just and upright in his dealings, and his sternness had injured only

his own flesh and blood. The rich have no lack of friends; therefore, amid eulogies and honors they left him to sleep till the resurrection trump in the old family burying ground. Through all this hard time, Richard Trent was a tower of strength. It was in his arms that Bessie found a chance to weep out her own grief. Her grandmother had clung to her like a little child. After she had fallen asleep, Bessie sought her unfailing refuge in trouble, Uncle Dick. He could soothe and comfort her as no one else in all the world.

Mrs. Preston sank rapidly after her husband's death. Her mind failed also, as her physical strength declined, and she could not bear to have Bessie out of her sight. This was a terrible strain upon the poor child. Richard Trent saw it, and in many ways contrived to lighten her burden.

Just at sunset, one lovely June day, two weeks after her husband had been laid to rest, the faithful wife died. The sun sank to rest in a blaze of golden glory. The invalid had been dozing for many hours, but roused herself as the rays streamed in through the western windows. Her eyes were bright with their old-time expression, and they rested on Bessie with unspeakable tenderness.

"It is almost over, darling," she said, "the long waiting time. Just beyond, David and Charles are waiting for my coming. You will be lonely, dear, but I leave you to God."

Then she asked, "Where is Richard Trent?"

Stepping forward, he answered, "Here."

"Richard Trent," she said, solemnly, "you were faithful to the child when she was orphaned in the years gone by. Promise me that you will still guard and cherish her when she is once more left desolate."

"I promise, ma'am," he said, brokenly. "Bessie shan't want fur eny care Uncle Dick kin give her."

"I know you would lay down your life for her sake, if need be," she answered, "and I die content."

Bessie's hands were closely clasped in hers, and the child would not remove them, although the tears were raining down her cheeks, and heavy sobs convulsed her frame. Gently, as a passing sunbeam, the weary soul slipped from its worn tenement of clay and joined the great majority in the beyond.

"It is all over," said the old nurse, softly closing her eyes. Bessie shrieked in her agony of grief, which she had been restraining by an intense effort, lest she should disturb the peace of the passing soul. Uncle Dick took her in his arms and bore her from the room to her own. There he cared for her for hours, quieting her stormy sorrow, holding her close against his heart, which ached to comfort his darling. His thoughts continually went back to that other scene, years before, when he had taken her from the side of her dead father. He thanked God that he could still be with her and minister to her in

her great need of comfort. Bessie was not a Christian. Although she had been so especially a blessing to others, no emergency in her maturer life had caused her to feel the need of Christ. So this source of strength was not hers to draw from in this hour of utter desolation. Richard Trent prayed for her salvation daily. His faith never wavered, although the answer seemed long delayed. Was this affliction needed to bring her to the foot of the cross?

After the funeral, Grandfather Preston's will was read. Aside from a few minor bequests, everything was given to Bessie. She was not only mistress of the old house, but heir to all the great Preston estates.

"How can I take care of it all, Uncle Dick?" she asked, pitifully. "It is too great a trust. I wish grandfather hadn't given it all to one weak little girl."

"Thet's jest what it is, Bessie," he answered, gravely and tenderly, "a sort o' trust. The Lord's given ye large possessions, an' he wants ye ter do good in this needy world."

"You'll have to show me how, Uncle Dick," she said, wearily. "I am such an ignorant child."

"Jest ask him ter show ye, darlin', one step at a time."

In grandfather's will was made the provision that Bessie should go to a celebrated school in Boston for two or three years, to finish her education, and be fitted for

her position in life. A cousin of her father came to be the housekeeper, and Richard Trent was to remain as chief manager. In the autumn, Bessie, with a sad heart, left the dear old home at River Plains, to enter a boarding school.

Her life there was uneventful. Her deep mourning, her rare beauty, her position as an heiress, won her plenty of attention. But here, as before, the natural sweetness and unselfishness of her disposition kept her from being spoiled by the homage she received. Perhaps it was well that her property was in the care of a guardian, else she might have dispensed aid unwisely. Every case of need awoke her sympathy, and she would gladly have given away all that she had, if it would have made others happier. She studied faithfully, and in three years graduated with high honors.

It was the last of June when she returned to the dear old home, ready to consider plans regarding her future life. The first evening, she closeted herself in the library for a confidential talk with Uncle Dick.

He, dear soul, was rejoiced to find her the same Bessie she had always been. Her brief vacation visits had assured him that she was not being led astray by her contact with the world. Now he fondly hoped that she had come to stay, for she was the joy of his heart.

"Grandmother told me, Uncle Dick," she said, "of a letter papa left for me, to be opened on my eighteenth

birthday. That is close at hand. Do you know anything about it?"

"Why, yes, child, it hez allers bin kept in thet box he left the papers in. Yer grandfather 'lowed ter keep thet jest ez near ez yer father left it ez he cud. Some ov the papers hed ter be used in court an' in settlin' up his biziness, but the most ov them is waitin' fur ye on yer eighteenth birthday."

"And I must wait two whole weeks more!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Uncle Dick, I long to read my father's letter, and yet it seems so solemn that I am half afraid. It is like a voice from the grave."

"It'll be a lovin', tender voice, Bessie," Uncle Dick answered.

More talk there was of the future, with its near responsibilities, for the will had provided that Bessie was to come into possession of her property on her eighteenth birthday. She had rather a startling plan to lay before Richard Trent. After her birthday was passed, and all her affairs in shape to leave, she and Uncle Dick would go to California and revisit the old scenes. It had long been the desire of her heart to bring her father's and her mother's dust and lay it in the home resting place.

The eventful day dawned. Bessie had an appointment with her guardian, a Boston lawyer, at one o'clock, and he was also to be entertained at dinner.

The forenoon hours were precious ones, for in them she

wished to read her father's parting words, written so many years before. As soon as she could escape from the loving congratulations of her friends upon the attainment of her majority, she sought her room, where she found Uncle Dick awaiting her, with the precious box in his hands.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT FORTUNE GULCH.

BESSIE was soon alone, with the closely written sheets of her father's letter open before her. Her being was thrilled with a strange sensation at the thought of a message from the dead. Pale and trembling, she took it up, but the paper shook in her hands.

When she gained courage to read it, she soon became absorbed at the revelations of her father's heart which it contained. The story of his life was written out with a fidelity to detail that made it a glowing, vivid word picture. She had never known much of her mother. The beautiful face in the portrait always smiled lovingly upon the girl, but the lips never unclosed to speak to her the words she longed to hear.

Anticipating the lack of all sources of knowledge, David Preston had written out for his daughter enough of her mother's story to acquaint her somewhat with the beautiful soul passed from earth. He dwelt lightly upon her grandfather's share in the injustice that had driven him to California, but with keen intuition she understood the whole matter.

The letter had been written in Fortune Gulch, only a

little before the sudden call which had left her orphaned and alone. The shadow of death was over his soul when he penned the lines, and in its haunting presence he had striven to write words of loving counsel, which should speak for him long after he had mouldered back to dust. Bessie read them with streaming eyes, and a tender reverence for the father who could speak thus to her heart.

These were the closing words :

“My child, you may hold in your hands the power which wealth bestows. Use it wisely, not for selfish ends ; for I have learned that money, valued for its own sake, brings only curses and sorrow. The world is full of pitiful need, of which you never can have dreamed. Scatter blessings, and you will reap a harvest of joy.

“My darling Bessie, when I think of you at eighteen, I can only see my Elizabeth, as she first stood before me, in the sweetness and beauty of her blossoming. Be worthy of your mother. May God bless and keep and guard my precious child. From the silent land I stretch out longing hands. Make the God of your mother your own God ; and purified by his blood, meet your loved ones in the beyond, which is not far from any one of us. The veil grows thin. Good-bye, my daughter, my only one.

“Your father,

DAVID PRESTON.”

Casting herself on her knees, Bessie sobbed forth :

“O God, the God of my parents, accept me on this day of days. All I am, and all I have, I consecrate to thy service. Only guard and guide thy weak and erring child. Amen.”

The sacrifice was accepted. With a new, strange peace, Elizabeth Preston arose from her knees, and knew that

henceforth she was not her own, but was "bought with a price."

Two weeks later, Bessie and Richard Trent turned their faces toward the setting sun. Not by wagon train this time; for now the Great American Desert was belted with iron rails, and swift steam engines made rapid communication possible between the shores of the Atlantic and the Pacific. Richard was filled with wonder as they sped swiftly and ceaselessly, day and night, on their westward way.

"It's a leetle different, Bessie," he said, "from the journey we made when I brought ye, a baby, 'cross the plains. Thet woz a quick trip fur them days, but times is changed, Bessie, times is changed."

Up, up, up, the great train climbed the mountains, and one morning they looked down upon the green valleys of California. Bessie gazed with misty eyes. It was the land of her birth, and the last resting place of her father and mother. Her own memories of it were dim and shadowy; but an overpowering love for the region of her birth filled her soul, as she gazed upon the beautiful vista spread out before her.

Their stay in Sacramento was a short one. The little town in the foot-hills, where David Preston had made his California home, was first sought out. The home itself was gone,—the silver mine and its accessories having swallowed up every vestige of the dwellings that formerly

occupied its vicinity. Their search in this locality was for a grave in the little cemetery, quaintly set in a nook of the hills.

After long searching among the scattered mounds, they found it. A stone had been placed to mark the spot, but the place had run wild from neglect, and the stone, partially fallen, was cracked and discolored. But Bessie could decipher the name—

“ELIZABETH MARY,

“BELOVED WIFE OF DAVID PRESTON.”

The dates of birth and death were not legible; but she had found sufficient proof that this was the grave she sought.

From here they went to Fortune Gulch. The cars ran as far into the mountains as Monte Christo, now a thriving city. Two lines of daily stages penetrated into the heights above. Taking passage in one of these conveyances, our travelers found themselves in Fortune Gulch one summer day, about sunset. It was on just such a golden day that Bessie had made her first entrance into the place.

Richard Trent looked around bewildered. This busy town, with pleasant homes, regular streets, and the hum of active business, bore small resemblance to the mining camp of his remembrance. He felt at an utter loss. Bessie came to the rescue.

"What hotels are there?" she asked of the obsequious driver, who awaited their commands.

He glibly named over three or four, the Rose House at the end of the list.

"Take us there," she said. And soon the stage drew up before a large, white building, very different from the Rose House of former times. This was certainly never Jem Flanigan's old saloon.

"Who keeps this ere house?" Richard asked, as they prepared to descend.

"Jack Rose, I believe they calls him. Leastways, his wife runs the house, and a mighty nice tidy place it is too; but Jack Rose, he's a sort o' travelin' preacher, and ain't to hum much."

So they had found one familiar name. A sturdy young man came out to meet the travelers, and help the driver with the baggage. Entering, a middle-aged woman came forward to greet the supposed strangers. Although grown more matronly, and of greater weight than in the former years, Richard had no trouble in recognizing her as Janet Rose.

She too, was puzzled by the familiarity of the face of the man before her. When he spoke, she knew him at once; and hearty, indeed, was the greeting between these old friends. But when Richard said:

"I s'pose ye wouldn't hev known Bessie?" the good woman's surprise quite overcame her, and she sank down

into a chair. Soon, however, she regained her self-control, and giving Bessie a warm embrace, exclaimed :

“I’ve always thought of you as little Bessie. I hardly dare to claim acquaintance with such a sweet young lady!”

But she was quickly convinced that Bessie was not so much changed as to ignore the friends of her helpless childhood. “Rosebud” proved to be a buxom lass, rosy and hearty, now known by the name of Jennie. Janet greatly wondered that such a bit of the past should step right into her present. It seemed to her that she was dreaming, and that she would waken to find that Richard and Bessie had vanished.

“Yes,” she said, in answer to their questioning, “John was drawn into preaching in spite of himself. He has a little church here, but he spends much of his time in the mining camps. Folks say he is doing a great deal of good.”

“Of course, he is,” answered Richard, heartily. “He begun doin’ good jest ez soon ez he struck these ere mountains; an’ by this time he must hev a pile ov it ter his credit.”

It was indeed true that John Rose had proved a veritable missionary. He had just the tact and manner to influence the rough men with whom he was thrown. In many camps he was a welcome messenger, and in the last day many redeemed souls from the hills will form the stars in his crown of rejoicing.

Richard Trent and Elizabeth Preston had laid broad

and generous plans for carrying on the good work in this needy region. As a result, funds were placed in the bank for a pretty memorial edifice for the church to which John Rose ministered. On a marble tablet, laid in the masonry of the front wall, was to be cut the words:

“DAVID PRESTON MEMORIAL.”

Nor was this all. An amount amply sufficient to make them independent for life, was invested for John Rose and his family, that he might give his undivided attention to the work he loved. Janet, however, refused to leave the Rose House, saying:

“It is my chance of doing good too. A Christian boarding house for the men, and a clean place for travelers, is a sort of mission, and I can’t be denied this share in John’s work. When I get old, and unable to carry the burden, I will thankfully fold my hands, and enjoy your bounty, dear friends. Till then, let me go on my chosen way.”

The next step was the establishment of a Free Library and Reading Room in Fortune Gulch, also to be known as the “David Preston Library.” John Rose was in charge of this trust, being empowered to employ his helpers. A generous fund was also placed at his disposal for his missionary work among the camps. The good man felt as if his burdens were being lightened in a marvelous manner, and his gratitude was unbounded.

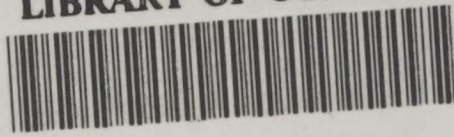
“Ah, Richard,” he said, “I little thought in that long ago time when, forlorn and discouraged, I set foot in Fortune Gulch, that the Lord had such a path marked out for me. You were Absalom then ; but out of the sin and roughness of that old life, God has made you a chosen vessel to help on his truth.”

A few days later, Bessie and Richard were standing beside David Preston's grave. It had been well cared for by John Rose and his faithful wife. California flowers were blooming upon the low mound, the tall shaft still gleaming white against its background of mountains. In this sacred spot, Elizabeth Preston consecrated herself anew to the uplifting of the needy. Richard stood beside her with bowed head. His thoughts were busy with his first knowledge of the man who was “'quainted with God.” Through him, and his helpless, orphaned baby, the Light of the World had come into his darkened soul. His future, also, was consecrated.

And so, in the spot where first we saw her, we leave our Bessie. She is standing on the Divide ; not only of God's uplifted mountain land, but also of her life. Hitherto, she has been in childhood's country ; henceforth, her face is turned toward a noble, self-sacrificing womanhood.

THE END.

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